HanTsuki Volume 1

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 1

半分の月がのぼる空

looking up at the half-moon

いきなり入院した。僕にとってはちょっと早い冬休みみたいなもんだ。

病院には同い年の里香って子がいた。彼女はわがままだった。まるで王女さまのようだった。でも、そんな里香のわがままは必然だったんだ……。

里香は時々、黙り込む。

砲台山をじっと見つめていたりする。

僕がそばにいても完全無視だ。

いつの日か、僕の手は彼女に届くんだろうか？　彼女を望む場所につれていってあげられるんだろうか——？

第4回電撃ゲーム小説大賞〈金賞〉受賞の橋本紡が贈る期待の新シリーズ第一弾、ついに登場!!

は-2-16

半分の月がのぼる空
looking up at the half-moon

橋本紡

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橋本　紡（はしもと つむぐ）

三重県伊勢市出身。第4回電撃ゲーム小説大賞で金賞を受賞。大好きなのは眠ること。平気で十二時間くらい寝てるので、人生のほぼ半分は寝てるらしい。もったいない気もするけど、それはそれで幸せだったり。小さな家に人間ふたりと猫二匹で暮らしている。

【電撃文庫作品】

猫目狩り〈上〉〈下〉
バトルシップガール①〜⑥、SP
毛布おばけと金曜日の階段
リバーズ・エンド
リバーズ・エンド2 slash the heart
リバーズ・エンド3 free the birds
リバーズ・エンド4 over the distance
リバーズ・エンド5 change the world
半分の月がのぼる空 looking up at the half-moon

イラスト：山本ケイジ（やまもと）

1978年生まれで和歌山在住。別ペンネーム「超肉」。ジェット・リーをこよなく愛す内臓やばい引き篭もり。イラストレーター夢見て修行中。

カバー／旭印刷

半分の月がのぼる空

looking up at the half-moon

橋本紡
Tsumugu Hashimoto

Illustration 山本ケイジ Keiji Yamamoto

「あたし、たぶん死ぬの」

なぜか笑いながら、里香は言った。

「もう、ほとんど決まってるの」

「あんた、お尻触っただろ!?　死ねクソジジイ！」

「いやあ、偶然じゃよ」

ギャーギャーギャー

亜希子さんの怒号が響く中、
僕はこっそり逃げだした。

空には半分の月があった。

ひどく明るく輝いていた。

月はいつも僕たちのそばにいてくれた。

CONTENTS

プロローグ　縞パンとミカン　11

第一話　亜希子さんと少女と芥川龍之介　19

第二話　僕たちの終わりある世界　79

第三話　砲台山へ至る道　157

エピローグ　覚えていない言葉　205

DESIGN : Yoshihiko Kamabe

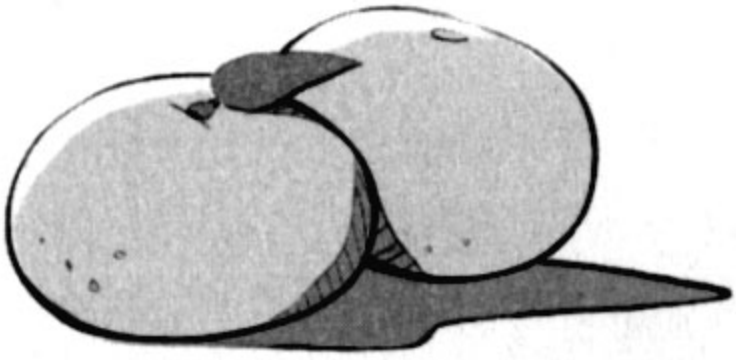
半分の月がのぼる空

looking up at the half-moon

Prologue: Striped panties and oranges (縞 Shimapan to Mikan)

プロローグ

縞パンとミカン



I was thinking of my dad as a good-for-nothing.

You see, he was a drunkard, a gambler and played around with other women, despite having wife and son at home. Really, my mother wept and wept, going through hardship after hardship. Out of this reason I regarded him as my enemy and despised him, avoiding any direct contact and we even had fights sometimes.

And this dad said, earnestly, to me:

"Soon, you too, will find a girl you'll like. Listen up. Take good care of her!"

"Are you dumb? That's not what you're doing, is it?!", I thought.

I guess he realized my feelings on this. After having made an awkward expression, he seemed like having changed his mind, next formed an angry face and eventually again a strange mien for some reason.

He said

"You see, in the olden days even I was ready to give up my life for your mother. No, that hasn't changed since then. Yeah, even now."

"Persuasive power = zero", I thought, "I can't see a bit of you being like this!".

By the way, this event happened in deep midsummer. It was a record-breaking summer with the sun roasting us at 30C for several days. And since my dad was sensitive to heat, he walked around in a single pair of pants. The pants were striped white and blue. Looking at this appearance I couldn't help but to feel no persuasive power from him.

Well, thinking now, his speech might have lacked persuasive power. But considering it was him, it might as well have been his honest thoughts. Yes, at that time his eyes --- although they had become dirty (perhaps by the years of his debauchery) --- they were glimmering faintly. They were exactly glimmering in the same manner, like when he was betting on a horse. So without doubt, these were serious eyes.

Some important person once left the adage

"The ones that tell the truth are morons"

behind. It's really like this.

Now I'm fully aware of it.

My dad's words were right.

Right---

Now I can comprehend them.

Although having gone through some quite painful experiences.

With "painful experiences" I'm by the way referring to the following.

It was pure coincidence that I threw a magazine in Rika's face. Since I discovered an interesting manga, I took the magazine that contained that manga full of goodwill from the lobby to her room. That is, because I wanted to comfort her, no matter how non significant, since she wasn't feeling well lately. I could cry of my own tenderness. Just like a little puppy that wags its tail in front of its owner.

But her reaction wasn't

"Thank you"

and it wasn't

"Thanks!"

nor was it

"Yuuichi, you're so kind.".

An orange attack

was it. [Anime: E1; 11:50]

If I had to explain what happened... the moment I entered her hospital room, an orange came flying from above. She had put one of the oranges she received from her visitors above the door, so that it'd fall on my head when I entered the room.

Something like this often appears in old dramas as

"The blackboard sponge that falls on the head of the teacher"

Her trap was similar to this.

The blockhead I am, I fell for this age-old trick and was shocked by that sudden attack, so that I let go of the magazine I was holding. That's how it hit the face of the girl that was sitting on her bed in front of me.

I affirm: it wasn't on purpose.

It was rather her fault for setting an inevitable trap, I'd say...

Of course Rika wasn't the same opinion.

"Hwath are you doing?!"

Holding her now fire-red nose, she started throwing one orange after the other with her face taut with anger. One, two, three --- oranges came flying in succession. While yelling out " Uwawawawa", I caught one after the other. But the fourth one filled up all space I had in my hands, so the fifth one hit me right in the face.

"Uwaaah---!"

While crying out, I broke down.

Rika laughed out loud watching me like this.

"Oh yeah! That should have been a lesson to you!"

Gosh, isn't that cruel? But even if something like this happens, I won't give up. Sure, it's discouraging and it makes me angry, but I won't give up.

It's such times when I remember the words of my dad.

Let me make one thing clear.

This is a trivial, ordinary story.

Just a story of a boy and a girl that meet.

There's nothing to add to this.

Well, of course many things happen, but these things can probably not compare to really serious events that happen all over the world (e.g. hundreds of people that starve to death, a war started by an idiotic and brutal dictator, or a big financial crisis).

Right, a simple and ordinary story.

Of course it was something special for us.

No, that doesn't feel quite correct....

For us, it was something really, really, special.

Chapter 1: Akiko, a girl and Akutagawa Ryunosuke (亜)

第一話

亜希子さんと少女と芥川龍之介

1

"Fhuu---"

The breath I breathed out froze immediately and dissolved into the air. I stopped and looked up in the sky. Although it was already five o'clock, the deep, dark winter morning sky was filled with lots of pridefully shining stars.

The star shining the strongest is called Sirius and is placed in the Southern Sky.

I don't know much about the names of those stars, but Tsukasa, a friend of mine, is pretty schooled in this field, so he teached me lots of things. Well, the only name I still remember is Sirius, though. I've compleeetely forgotten the rest.

After a short walk, I arrived at the shopping street.

It's eerily silent under this arcade.

It feels as if it was dead.

No---

It really is dead.

The area a bit off the station around here has grown lonely. Originally it was a lively shopping street, but now half of the shops have been shut down. The once brightly colored shutters are now covered with rust and aren't even opened during the day.

Some are calling them in the sad way "The shops with the silvermantled shutters".

It wasn't like this, when I still was young. The people living in the center of the city came shopping in this street. There always were lots of guests enjoying the shopping, and merchants running about busily all the time because of this. I got excited just by walking below this arcade.

There is a scene that's still fresh in my mind. I think it was when I was about four or five years old.

I was walking around holding the hand of my mom. A lot of people were there and on high spirits. Just by enjoying the atmosphere I was already having fun and looked with big eyes at the people passing by and the shops. The the shopping street sure felt like the heart of the city.

Now it's just shadow of its former self...

I've only lived 17 years, but there are many memories of this arcade-covered shopping street. It was the book shop in this street, where I bought my first book. I went buying it with a thousend-yen banknote in my hands. It was in this street when I first went watching a movie in a cinema. A Sci-Fi movie, in which a smuggy ship's captain was the hero. It was the Sushi bar in the the heart of this street, where I drank sake for the first time. I think I wasn't even in elementary school at that time.

My dad made me drink the sake.

"That stuff's delicious! Want some?"

As the pure young boy I was then, I believed his words and drank off the about half-filled cup of original japanese sake.

Of course I broke down immediately after having done that.

My eyes spinned around, the world was shaking and everything became flabby. Even now I still remember it clearly. Looking at me collapsed on the floor, he started guffawing. Really, the worst dad existing.

Anyway, I've got many memories of this shopping street. So I feel a bit down seeing it dying out. A wind of the same kind as the one that is blowing though the street below the arcade, was also blowing through my heart---

Though I was quite fond of this time in the morning, when the city's still covered in darkness without any sign of life. That is because it's the only time I feel the things are at their right place, in contrast to when everything feels wrong in this world.

But of course that's just my subjective impression.

Biro---n! Biroroooo----n!

"U-Uwah!"

Because of the music playing all of a sudden I raised my voice unconsciously.

The source of the sound was my mobile phone.

I thrust my hands in a hot haste into my pockets, and cut its energy. I stopped it on the dot. It's not like someone called me. It was just the alarm clock function I set to five o'clock,

Fear started to well up within me.

(Oh shit, Akiko will get angry if I don't return soon...)

Driven by this fear I dashed off.

After slipping out of the shopping street, I hit upon an about waist-high gate, on which other side's the parking lot of the hospital. Several cars were stopped on there; I guess they belong to the night shift employees. And beyond this parking lot is the small hospital, which consists of three stories.

Behind several windows I could already see the light turned on.

Bearing the tension I quickened my steps. Leaving the main gate as is, I proceed to the right side of the building. The main entrance is locked at this time. I walked around to the back side, where I stumbled upon a brown door.

I open the door carefully... very carefully.

This is the sole place where you can pass through during the night.

I was prudent.

One time Akiko was lying in wait for me and attacked me with the bottom of her slippers the moment I entered. She blazed with anger and gave me a sermon for more than 20 minutes, while having me kneel on the hard ground. I was then lectured for more than twenty minutes. I mean, I am sick after all, so I wish that she'd be a little more caring.

Leaving the door open, I froze.

(Is it alright--?)

I paid attention to the noise I made.

I poked my head inside.

There was no-one there, just benches lined up neatly. It was the lobby. This place, which was so busy during the daytime, was now , as expected, quiet.

I breathed out in relief.

The first obstacle has been crossed.

I came inside, and after closing the door softly, I took my shoes in my hands and tiptoed down the dark corridor. About ten meters down, there was a left fork. It went on to become a slightly inclined slope. It was a slope for wheelchairs. For safety reasons, the floor of the slope was covered with rubber, and that made it hard for my footsteps to reverberate.

But, there's a difficulty with this slope.

Around its middle, the slope winded hard, and after that, everything was clearly visible from the nurse station.

I stood at the corner, and peeked around it. The lights were on in the nurse station, which was located at the end of the hallway. The nurse on duty was awake.

It was around ten meters from the corner to the nurse station.

I call it the 'Ten Meters of Terror'. There's nothing that I can hide with there. It's all over if the nurse looks this way. That line of sight would accurately blow me away.

Taking just one deep breath, I leaped out. While keeping my posture as low as possible, as well as making sure that my feet didn't make too much noise, I sprinted forth.

Ten meters.

Seven meters.

Five meters.

My heart pounded. Beacuse I was too hurried, I stumbled, about to fall. But, I somehow managed to regain my balance, and I put on more speed.

Three meters.

One meter.

And I burst out into the hall. One more obstacle down. I immediately turned to the left. The third door from here is my room. A sense of accomplishment welled up within my chest.

But!

Just as I put my hand on the door.

"Yuuuuiiiiiiiichiiiiii!"

Behind me, somebody shouted.

Turning around in a panic, as I thought, Akiko was there. Her left leg was raised, and her right arm was pulled back. In short----she was winding up. For a girl, it was a rather amazing pitching stance.

I stood there, waving my hands desperately.

"A-Akiko, it isn't what you think! I-I-I-I-I-I wasn't sneaking out or any-!"

My desperate explanation was interrupted.

Bsssssssshhhhhhhhhhh--------!

Raising an impressive noise, something brown----that is, a hospital slipper (the bottom of one), scored a direct hit on my face.

First, I had a fever.

My body felt heavy.

I thought it was a cold.

This was about two months ago.

Colds get better with sleep, and both my mother and I didn't really like the hospital, so I just continued to sleep without going to the hospital. Every day, I slept about twenty hours, I think. Sleepiness dwelt in the core of my body, and I could always sleep. Thinking about it now, I should have realised that something was strange about then.

My body didn't get better no matter how much I slept. Though my temperature went up and down, it was always above thirty-eight degrees, and the sluggishness of my body didn't go away. At that time, even raising my arm was tough.

At the point where I had continued like that for a week, as expected, we realised that it wasn't a cold. Even then, I had no intention of going to the hospital----I really, really hate the hospital ----but my worried mother suddenly started to panic, and finally I was forcibly brought there.

After finishing my checkup, the doctor immediately said this:

"You're going to be hospitalized."

And really, immediately.

"For at least two months."

The name of the disease was acute hepatitis.

It's a disease that comes about from viruses, so it's kinda the same as a cold, but this virus rendered my liver virtually useless. Well, though I say that, it isn't really that serious. It's completely healed in about two or three months, and there're no aftereffects at all.

However, in that two or three months, exercise is completely forbidden.

It seems like stress isn't good either.

At any rate, continuing to sleep without having a care is the best treatment.

But, and I say but.

After a month of hospitalization, my body had mostly gotten better. Normally, I didn't feel sick at all. Furthermore, I'm a seventeen year old high school student. There's no way I could just lie in my bed and sleep.

In general, the hospital is a horribly boring place. First of all, at 9:00 PM, all the lights go out. From then on, you can't turn on the TV or radio either. It's completely dark, so you can't pass the time by reading either. Anyways, it was just free time and free time and free time.

Eventually, I started to sneak out of the hospital at night. Happily, my friend's house was close to the hospital, so I escaped there. If I go to his place, there's TV, there's video games, and there's manga; compared to the hospital, it's heaven.

Of course, for the nurse Akiko, she can't just look it over.

That's how it is.

So, during what seems like every night, my epic battle with Akiko unfolds.

Life is something that doesn't go your way.

Those words were something that my father always muttered----usually after he had bet on the wrong horse. Now, I was seriously feeling that. Really, life never goes well...

"You know, Yuuichi."

While hitting me on the head with the head of her slipper, Akiko spoke.

"How many times am I going to have to say this before you understand?"

Seemingly extremely angry, Akiko's voice was low.

By the way, I was kneeling in front of the nurse station. My back was completely straight, my knees were perfectly straight in front of me, and my hands were laid upon them----something like that.

Well, it's something that I'd like to show off.

An old granny was pointing at me and giggling, and a child patient was asking his mother: "What's that person doing?". The mother quickly said: "Don't look!", and hurriedly passed by me, dragging her child behind her.

Ahh, this is hell...

Even though I knew it was useless, I forced a smile.

"Ha-Hahahaha. That's not it. I was just going for a walk."

I can't do this; it feels like I can't even smile correctly anymore.

Akiko narrowed her eyes.

"Aha? A walk? You disappeared right after lights out, didn't you?"

My heart nearly skipped a beat, but I told myself to calm down. It could be that this was just a leading question, couldn't it?

"N-No way. I was sleeping."

Emphasis.

Akiko's eyes narrowed even further.

"Yeah, sleeping. Your bag, that is."

"Uu----"

Before heading out, I pushed my bag under my futon. So that it'd look like someone was sleeping. The fact that Akiko knows that means...in short----

She knows.

All of it.

My knees trembled. Panicking, I pushed down on them with my hands. Even while getting nervous, I looked up and Akiko was smiling ominously.

'Hehe', her cheeks pulled up.

"Ha-Hahaha."

Without thinking, I returned the laugh.

"Ha-Hahaha."

It was something like, there was nothing else I could but laugh.

Akiko is a nurse at this hospital. She has a rather pretty face, so if she kept quiet, she'd have a bit of that impressive beauty feeling, but this was *really* scary. If you listen to the rumours, the Akiko in high school was *bad*.

I've seen a picture of Akiko in high school just once.

On the clothes the seventeen year old Akiko was wearing:

"Ise gulf bikers, *please take care of me*"

or

"A seventeen year old girl *really loves you*."

or

"Fighting elite : None can match me"

Stuff like that was sewn into it.

Well, the point here is, she was that kind of person.

Now she's a nurse, so she mostly treats patients with a gentle expression, but when she gets angry, her nature comes out.

I continued to laugh.

"Hahahaha."

Akiko-asn also continued to laugh.

"Heheheheheheheheh."

"Hahahahahahaha."

"Heheheheheheheheheheheh!"

"Hahahahahahahahahaha!"

Akiko and I just continued to laugh.

How do I say this, it was kind of weird and bizarre.

Bsssssssshhhhhhhhhhh--------!

About seven seconds later, that weird and bizarre scene was interrupted by that noise.

"O-Ouch..."

I clutched my head.

My head was smashed full on with the bottom of a slipper. Seems like the angle was just right; the place that was hit ached.

Akiko's anger filled shout descended upon me.

"Just because your body's gotten a little better, don't just decide by yourself that you're gonna go out walking! If you keep doing stuff like that, you'll never be able to leave the hospital!"

"A-Akiko..."

"What is it!?"

"You're speaking like a guy..."

"Huh?"

I'm being glared at. What amazing pressure. Still smiling awkwardly, I froze. Just like how a frog freezes when being stared at by a snake, I guess.

"Yuuichi."

"Y-Yes?"

"Make me a promise. Never sneak out of the hospital again."

I nodded my head up and down.

"I won't, I won't."

"Really? If you break this promise--"

"If I break it?"

"I might make you dance the Bon Festival dance naked."

"Naked!? The Bon Festival dance!?"

"Horrible isn't it? That'd be sad, wouldn't it?"

She smirked.

The smile of the devil.

"Do you want to do it? A nude dance?"

That's gotta be just a threat...thinking that would be a stupid mistake. Akiko's a woman who'll really do it if she says she will. At that moment, the image of me dancing the Bon Festival dance while naked appeared clearly in my head...

"I-I don't."

I somehow made my face spasm, and answered.

Akiko nodded.

"Then, keep your promise. Whatever the case, there's a girl in this hospital too."

"Y-Yes."

I nodded earnestly, but I felt that there was something off with what Akiko had said.

There's a girl?

The Municipal Wakaba Hospital in which I was hospitalised was pretty small, so there's got to be at most a hundred patients. More than half of those are grandmas and grandpas over seventy, and the remaining half is mostly people over thirty.

Was there a girl here?

"Well, the rest depends on your attitude. If you break this promise, within that day, you'll be naked and da----"

Akiko suddenly screamed: "Kyaaaaaaa!"

Wow, Akiko's screaming like a girl! Thinking that, I brought my head up, and standing behind Akiko was Tada.

He was grinning lewdly.

"You touched my butt, didn't you!"

Once she turned around, Akiko shouted, her face completely red.

Tada, who should be turning eighty this year, continued to grin.

"Ahh, sorry 'bout that, Akiko. My hand must've touched it just a liiitttlee bit. I mean, it's because this hallway's narrow."

And while grinning, he said that carefreely.

Of course, it was definitely a lie.

He touched Akiko's butt on purpose.

I know pretty well since he's in the neighbouring room; Tada is a true blue pervert grandpa. In any case, he's hiding a mountain of

erotic books under his bed. Human's 'wither' or 'become more reserved' as they gain age, or at least that's what I thought, but after getting to know Tada, I've come to revise my opinion.

Obviously, it seems like Akiko knows about that too.

"You pervert grandpa! Don't lie to me!"

"Are you doubting a sick grandpa like me? You're a horrible girl ..."

"Don't look like you're sick only at this kind of time!"

"Ahh, my heart's pounding. My blood pressure..."

"Liar! Die, you pervert grandpa!"

Watching the exchange between the two (which went on just normal) out of the corner of my eye, I stood up slowly, so I wouldn't be noticed by Akiko.

I've got to run away during this opening.

2

Akiko's surveillance became more strict.

As might be expected, the personality of a former delinquent is on a different level. When lights out came, she put a bench outside my door. The door's in this hospital open outward, so I could no longer open the door from the inside.

A confinement with which I couldn't argue about.

"What'll I do if I need to go to the toilet!"

When I tried to resist using that method, Akiko pressed a transparent container with a weird shape into my hands.

It was a bottle for urine.

Completely shocked at the treatment I was receiving...

"S-Seriously?"

I asked, and...

"Seriously! Have fun!"

I was nodded at, the bottle still in my hands.

Really, as expected, the personality of a former delinquent is on a different level.

It wasn't only at night that the surveillance was tighter. It was also more strict during the day. When I get hungry, I go to the supermarket on the other side of the street to buy bread or sweets, but that was all forbidden. Just going to the lobby, the woman sitting at the reception window would glare at me. And when I tried to circle to the back, this time, my hand was grabbed by one of the cleaning ladies.

"Sorry, but I was asked by Akiko. You get it, right?"

Nodding, I returned to my hospital room like I was running away. Exceeding what I had even dreamed of, the surrounding net was wide and surrounded me perfectly...

"Haaaaah~~~~~"

Letting loose a sigh, I walked down one of the hallways of the hospital.

Now, the only place I could tread carefreely was within the hospital. However, a hospital is filled with doctors, nurses, and sick people, the worst place ever. Just having a young hospitalised patient is in itself rare, so if things don't go well, then the traps which involve groups of grandpas and grandmas dragging me into their small talk are waiting for me. A terrible trap where, once dragged in, it would be at least an hour before I was released.

Despite that, my *friends* completely misunderstood what hospital life was like.

"Must be nice...there's beautiful nurses, right?"

They said things like that, but that's just a fantasy.

If they wanted to know the reality, they'd just need to be threatened by Akiko once.

Then they'd know...they'd be dead, but they'd know.

"Haaaaah~~~~~)"

Letting loose another sigh, I plodded down the corridor, which the sunlight shone in.

Really, this is boredom.

At first, I was happy that it was fine that I didn't go to school, but as might be expected just continuing my life of boredom like that and instead I started to miss school, which was rather strange.

Ahh, I want to take a noon-time nap in the afternoon classroom. ..

The udon of that horrible cafeteria seems so nostalgic...

Eventually, I reached a fork in the corridor.

In Municipal Wakaba Hospital, there's the west hospital wing and east hospital wing. My room was in the west hospital wing, and mostly it was used for the people with relatively light diseases . And, on the other side of the courtyard, there was the east hospital wing. There, the people who're being hospitalised for a long time or have serious disease are housed.

I had decided not to go much to the east hospital wing.

What we call hospitals, though a rubbish definition, are places that are relevant to the sick. People who would reside there would mean their sickness had reached to some extent; and to those who would go to the acute disease sector, are people who have contracted really serious illnesses—illnesses that wouldn’t be of any matter like mine.

I stopped walking long the corridor.

I was a bit reluctant to go there with the attitude of trying pull a prank or kill time.

I remembered I had once lost my way in the east hospital wing. Just when I was going around in circles, I heard a crying sound from afar. I didn't take much concern of it and followed to the source of the sound out of pure curiosity. Of course, I hadn't any mental preparations for what was awaiting me. Then, I saw a scene—there were two young people, a male and a female, sobbing and embracing each other in the corner of the corridor. The female was biting her thin lips, and the male was trying to act strong and say something to the female. He would sometimes even wipe his eyes.

I had no idea what happened. I couldn't put the odds and ends together.

This was because I left in a panic afterwards.

At that time, I thought I had seen something I shouldn't have seen.

Perhaps, things like disasters weren't that rare as they seem. They are incessantly going around and happening despite being out of our reach.

The east hospital wing gave me such a thought.

"Go back," I murmured to myself, my body turning back.

Let me head to the roof and bath in the sun. The wind wouldn't blow against me beside the water tank, and it was warm in this season. Bringing along with me a manga would also be nice.

As my thoughts went wild, my eyes were captivated by something.

Black lustrous hair.

White skin.

I could see from the windows of the corridor some of the east hospital wing rooms, and in one of them there was a young girl leaning against the window.

She laid her hands on the window frame, gazing upon the sky.

I was a bit surprised.

Since the two months of hospitality, I had a bit of remark on every patient in the hospital since the hospital wasn't a huge one.

Hospital.

There shouldn't be girls of this age in the hospital.

"Is she here to visit someone?" mumbled I to myself. I saw the clothes on her, which deterred away my proposition. She was wearing aqua blue pajamas. No one would visit someone in his or her pajamas. Only patients in the hospital would have such an outfit.

Akiko's words suddenly rang in my ears, "There are girls in the hospital."

She was right. She had to know something about that longhaired girl.

"Your eyes are quite sharp," she laughed maliciously.

Though I was bit infuriated, I couldn't do anything that would anger Akiko, as I would be the final loser. Besides, Akiko was holding an injection needle, which could target my left arm's vessels with its sharp needle head.

Or to put it another way, I was a patient preparing to be drip-fed by Akiko, the nurse responsible for this job.

If I happen to go against her at this times...

"Oh, sorry, I made a mistake."

She would say such words and poke me with the needle with the wrong places—places far from the correct position; along with that, the same action would repeat about three times. When she first took such actions on me, I knew deeply in my heart the scary aspect of Akiko after repeated dismal events. I knew I had to be extra careful when she was holding the injection needle.

"When did she start living in the hospital?" I asked as I looked closely to the approaching lens. I had been drip-fed almost every day now, but I still hadn't got used to this pain.

"Let me think about it. About three days ago. I heard she was transferred here from some hospital outside our district," answered Akiko as she injected the needle into my blood at the same time. The skill of injecting someone had a disparity. Skilled people would get their job finished without letting you feel any pain. And Akiko is one of those who do it the bad and crude way. As the pain went through me, I slightly cried, "...uagh!"

"You're so feeble."

How dare she say this? It was her fault!

"If you're a man, stand the pain."

I had to stand the pain. If I had any complaints, she might not even tell me anything.

"What is the name of the girl?"

"Akiba Rika. Seventeen, the same as you."

"The same as me..."

"You're thinking something, right?"

She laughed at me maliciously again. I denied her solemnly, " No!"

"Oh, is that so? Hm...?"

She kept on giggling endlessly. Suppressing my anger, I continued to ask, "Does she reside in the east hospital wing? Is her sickness acute?"

At that instant, Akiko's feelings slightly changed. She still kept her frivolous smile, but there were no hint of a smile in her eyes.

"She's fine. Nothing about her."

She was lying. I knew right what this meant. Doctors and nurses are even more reluctant to speak when the patient's illness are more acute. People who rarely go to the hospital might not know what these words meant and really believe it wasn't a big deal. Nevertheless, I had lived here for two months, and I was sure she was lying. The girl had to have a serious illness. A very heavy burden suddenly fell right into my abdomen. It was a burden close to grief and sorrow, yet there was a slight and subtle difference in there. Perhaps, I was slowly accustomed to the deaths in the hospital. It was usual for patients to reside in a hospital, students in schools, and policemen in the police office. Everything had their reason. There were other examples of the sort. For example, there are patients with serious illnesses who pass away without having any hopes. They could protest and complain to God, or they can go to a place with high altitude, and shout out loud, releasing their emotions. However, diseases won't cease by such actions. It would slowly and gradually advance and bring death alongside it one day or another. At those times, the last resting place for one is to get accustomed to death. Very slowly, puffing out the damp and heavy breath accumulated under your chest—this was the only thing that could be done.

3

Using my special move, “killing everything in double speed”, finished the drop-feeding process in twenty-three minutes. Having lived in the hospital for some time, I had learnt different kinds of skills. For example, there were wheelchairs in the preparation room in the second floor. Wheelchair number two had loose front wheels that would give one the experience of hovering in mid-air. Its wheels woud spin in circles, making creaking sounds. Take another simple example. If you were to make any request to Akiko , she would forget it completely, and the head nurse, Yokota, wouldn’t be responsible of any consequences, though her weakness was too wary of having others to take care of matters for her. Checking the nurses’ patrol status could be said as the basic knowledge any patient living in the hospital would know. ‘Health Control’ was also a thing that couldn’t be forgotten, for should one ’s temperature slightly rise, one would have to receive an injection. So, if they find a problem with the needle, they would have to adjust the temperature of the thermometer to the right position to perform the best temperature. Letting the drop-feed process accelerate was also one of those techniques, though it was out of the blue difficult to perform. The technique was essentially simple: turn the knob of the rate of the drop-feed tube. This simple procedure, however, couldn’t be employed with ease. Should one accelerate in a frenzy fashion, one’s body wouldn’t be able to catch up with the drop-feed’s speed and feel an urge of repugnance and to vomit. When I first adjusted the speed, I completely feel into such a trap and vomited everywhere on my bed. But now, I was a mediocre to skilled person of such act.

"All right. It's over!"

Having been drop-fed, I immediately stood up. Twenty-three minutes seemed a pretty good result. Akiko's set speed would at least be higher than an hour, so strapped on the bed for such a prolonged time was too bad a thing to do to myself. So I utilised the aforementioned technique. My sickness was only one of those carefree illnesses that can be easily treated. Drop-feeding was only supplementing the body with nutrients, so it wouldn't really matter if I accelerate the process. Though if I were to use the same skill when being drop-feeding with medicine, dismal consequences would occur. I even heard that feeble patients doing this could be fatal.

Pulling the pin off, I stood up.

I didn't have a planned destination I want to go to; all I wanted to do was to stroll around the hospital. Anyhow, my legs brought me to the east wing hospital, most likely induced by my subconscious. I stopped along the corridor that connected the two buildings. There was a saying called 'Crossing the Rubicon', which seemed to describe ironclad determination. Allegedly, there was a mighty Roman captain who broke the rules and led his soldiers over the Rubicon River, which made him the ruler of a vast empire . Although what I was going through shouldn't be described with such extravagant examples, the corridor I was walking through really seemed long. Should I advance or go back? When such silly thoughts came onto me, I thought I was making too much of a fuss over a small matter, making myself seem like an idiot. No one would really die in an instant no matter what choice I made. Besides, did it even matter if someone I didn't know died? It had

nothing to do with me. As I persuaded myself, I leapt forward and continued advancing. I strolled along the corridor in an easy and comfortable fashion. Unlike the west hospital wing where patients would stroll everywhere at their own will, the east hospital wing had only complete silence. In this deadly stillness, I heard the walking sounds of a nurse along the corridor from afar. As I started to immerse myself into this sullen atmosphere, I began to become afraid of what was behind this silence. Yet, I kept walking like nothing had happened. At last, I arrived to the ward.

"Akiba Rika"

This was what written on the 235 board with a marker. I remembered it was her name. There wasn't any noise coming from inside the ward, so she might be sleeping or undergoing a check-up. It was at this time that feelings thrust into me: if only I had a little talent in hitting on someone, then I could say something easy like 'hello' and talk about whatnot after knocking the door. With this progression, probably I could develop a nice atmosphere with her after a week, hands holding together after two weeks, and after three weeks...

What the hell was I thinking? These delusions were impossible to me now. How could I do such scary stuff? If I was really capable of, I should have had two girlfriends by now.

And as a result, I could only heave a sigh as I gazed upon the door.

"Sigh..."

I decided to leave the east hospital wing, leaving only the feeling of being defeated behind me. Having returned to the west hospital wing, there was still the silence of the east hospital wing surrounding me.

Akiba Rika, uh? As I spotted her from afar, I didn't know how she looked like. Of course, I wouldn't know what sickness she had contracted, or why she was living in the east hospital wing. I was completely clueless of her. If I had a chance to talk to her, perhaps I could teach her some techniques that could be used in this hospital .

"Have you gone out just now?"

Turning to a side unintentionally, I found Tada standing where my eyes landed on. He was too short to be noticed. Old and curled up, his height might just even reach my chest.

"Yeah. I was just having a stroll."

"Isn't it boring to stroll around in the hospital?" Tada smiled, making crackling sounds.

My emotions were still hung by the girl in the east wing hospital, so I couldn't think straight. Even more, I wasn't sure whether I was hung by the 'east wing building' or 'the girl who resides there'.

Tada waved his head over to the direction of his ward.

"What's the matter? Do you want to come in and have a seat?"

"Eh? Can I?"

At that instant, I couldn't help but gasp and forget everything that was occupying my mind; the only thing that was on my head was—Tada's collection. It was alleged that Tada, having lived in the hospital for ten years, spent most of his time in hospital searching for pornographic books and had now collected an enormous amount. Another patient aged seventy-three who lived in ward room 207 with diabetes once said with sorrow, "I can never be compared to Tada!" Someone else aged sixty-eight with a fracture in his right wrist bone who lived in ward room 215 once said with a similar sentiment, "This is too shocking," and gazing to a distance as he said that.

"If I could be five years younger..."

What do you want to do if you're five years younger? After all, those collection was as enormous as they were alleged so. I turned towards Tada's ward. At last, it was time to do the wondrous inspection. I had always heard of rumours, telling Tada liked to play around with people and pretending and prohibiting people from looking at his collection...though I wasn't those who really wanted to look. I just wanted to have a glimpse of what there was. Yeah. A glimpse wouldn't hurt...

Tada opened the door as he nodded.

"Please enter."

"Excuse me, then."

But the door suddenly closed before me.

“Oh, I forgot I have a check-up waiting for me.”

“What? A check-up?”

“Yeah. Sorry. You know how scary Akiko could become.”

“Then let’s talk about it next time,” said Tada, leaving me with such a word.

I was left behind, standing in my original position.

“...”

That old fart who liked to cheat people around.

Inspection after letting me have so much hopes? Did he just remember it? Or did he simply didn’t...

Only now did I understand why Akiko would scold at the old fart.

The town’s Jaku Kanou hospital was situated at a high place in the town, and from the roof one could gaze upon the small to medium towns below. The town I was living in was a suburban area, with population no more than one hundred thousand. There also seemed to be a decline in the population gradually over the past decade. In short, this was a declining place. In fact, the shops in front of the station were closing down gradually. Some even said the only department store in the town was going to close down shortly. Although somebody devised a plan to revitalise the

town a few years ago, the plan seemed to be called to a stop after some bumping into some problems. Probably this place would just decline, step by step, into its death.

The only thing that was renowned in this town might be the Ise shrine. The Ise shrine still serves the ancestors of today's Japanese kings, and because of its long history, the prime minister would come to pray to them in New Year's. This was the reason why the Ise shrine could escape from the fate of turning into dust and ashes .

"Wuaghhh," I couldn't help making a super loud yawn.

I was now leaning on the fence on the roof, gazing upon the town's scene upon my eyes. There was a large forest in the centre of the town, and that was the Ise shrine. This place was originally developed because of the Ise shrine. There weren't many commercial buildings in the town, as if the town was just an extension of the plain ground. As my eyes floated to the right, I saw a towering mountain. It was actually called the Dragon Head Mountain, though local people call it the Turret Mountain. I heard from them that in the past, when the Japanese army was still fighting with the American army, forts were installed on that place . There seemed to be also some of the debris of forts there. By the way, the people at that time was so bold to fight with such a big country. If I were one of them, I would perhaps be the first one trying to escape. Although those old grandpas bet on their strong will and dignity to fight, but wills and dignities are the dumbest words in the world. Are these things really worth betting one's life on? How boring. As I thought of whatnot, I gazed upon the scenes of the residential areas.

"What are you doing?"

Suddenly a voice came from behind. I turned around, happening to find Akiko standing there.

"I'm only idling away time."

As what I said was true, my reply sounded a bit dumb.

"Oh," murmured Akiko. Bored, she took out some cigarettes from her nurse uniform. She held the cigarette in her mouth, lighting it up with strangely skilled actions, and deeply inhaled, puffing out a vast amount of smoke afterwards. Under the blowing, winter wind, it spun around and vanished among the air.

"Ah. The taste is great. Wonderful!"

I was dazzled. What nurse was this?

"Excuse me, can nurses smoke?"

"There are many people who smoke because they became nurses. After all, there's too much pressure in this job. Everyone would steal a cigarette or two in the toilets."

"Isn't it a bad idea to smoke in front of the sick?"

"Uh? What are you talking about?"

I was glared ferociously for a moment. I decided to remain silent for the time being. It occurred to me that I couldn't speak up in front of Akiko now. Nevertheless, Akiko suddenly smiled.

"Do you want one?" She asked as she poked her cigarette towards me.

"Ah? May I?"

"You're a high school student anyway. Smoking a cigarette isn't any big deal. I've started smoking a lot earlier. When I was at year three in middle school, I started using a specialised toothbrush to get rid of the smoke dirt."

I didn't take the cigarette in front of me. It wasn't because I wasn't interested; it's just that I didn't feel like taking it actively. But if one of these chances happen to find me, it's all right if I try a bit...

I stretched my hand to take the cigarette.

"Then, excuse me...wuaghh!"

It's burning! My fingernails! At that instant, I couldn't make up what was happening. But after about three seconds, I knew at last what was going on. Akiko had, out of my expectation, burnt my fingernails with the head of her cigarette. No, 'burn' might be too much of an exaggeration; the fire of the head of the cigarette just touched my finger with a sizzling sound. I put my right hand onto my chest, crying out dismally.

"W-What were you trying to do?" I cried, my eyes welled with tears, fogging up my vision.

Akiko smiled maliciously, saying, “Idiot. Don’t get too much of yourself. Aren’t you a patient? How can you smoke? If you can’t resist such a little temptation, how could you get on with bigger ones later!”

One day, I would slice her apart. I had to slice you apart. I swore in my heart again solemnly. Even if I couldn’t really slice you apart, I would let you die in a disgusting manner.

I didn’t know why Akiko was enjoying herself at, but she just looked at me, smiling continuously. Though I tried to veil my intention of killing her, I was still scared of her power, and cringingly pulled my back together. Staying like this, we both kept silent for some time, gazing upon the town ourselves.

“What a small town!” Akiko commenced at last.

“Yeah,” I nodded, still trying to veil my intention of killing her.

“You should be graduating after one year. What do you want to do after you graduate then?”

“I want to study in Tokyo or Nagoya, but I haven’t decided.”

“Are you leaving this town?”

“I do have such plans.”

Actually, it was my primary goal. It didn’t matter what school I study in or what subject I take. All I want was to get out of this town. I want to have a glimpse of the world outside. It wasn’t right

for a man to be born in such a small town and die with only the knowledge of this town.

"I want to go and have a look. Anywhere would be fine."

I had always heard of this line on the television or in the magazines. But was that truly the thing they desire? As a high school student, I couldn't go anywhere. I only had a few thousand yen to spend, mainly in activities inside the town. Even if I had to go outside the town, I would have to come back immediately for school. Of course, I had ways to apply for an absent leave in school , but my parents would never permit me to do so. Even without the restrictions the school and my parents give me, it was still unexpectedly difficult to go somewhere I desire. Humans are destined to be restricted by all kinds of things, physically and non-physically. And even more surprisingly, non-physical restrictions seem to be even more than physical ones. Every time I would think of this at night, I would feel bad about myself. Sometimes, in my heart, I would imagine myself living eternally in this small town. Then, I would feel melancholic and depressed and even have an urge to throw everything aside. But damn. This was impossible. As a result, I was still restricted by all kinds of things. I certainly understand why, but it was because I understood that I couldn't stand it. First things first—I don't mean I hate the town I grew up in. Not only do I have a certain extent of favour here but also a feeling of longing to stay here. Nevertheless, I don't want to stay here forever, for this town appeared to me like the end of the world. I would only have this feeling because this was my birthplace. It was my deepest desire to leave here—probably not now, but one day I must.

"Is that so? It's great."

"Eh? What's great?"

"I'm so jealous of you."

Akiko's voice sounded very rueful.

"This is because I would stay forever," I said, showing a naive smile without any extra thought.

In the eyes of Akiko were a gleam of light that was inconsistent to her style.

"Hey. You're right, but it's easier said than done."

"Really?"

"Really. If you only know this place, you would sometimes feel that it would be scary to leave this place. It's just like how my cat resides in my house. When I take her out occasionally, she would be so scared she wouldn't dare move an inch. It s all thanks that she was a female cat that she made her so strong when she scratched my hand. She's really afraid of the outside world."

"Oh."

I couldn't believe Akiko would use words like 'scary'. With a bit of surprise, I gazed at her face, my mind only having the unrivalled, super Akiko—though a person like her would have some restrictions by things which couldn't be seen.

Akiko laughed embarrassedly.

"After all, I'm a woman, unlike you men. Right, doesn't that long bench trouble you?"

The long bench she was talking about was the one that was put in front of my ward's door to block me from getting out.

"Yes. It's surely troublesome."

Akiko laughed, covering her lips.

"So, let me remove it."

"Ah. Can you?"

"Yes, but there's one requirement."

"Requirement?"

"Can you go to find Rika and chat with her?"

For a while there I couldn't make up what she meant. Rika? Chat with her? I spent some time to connect these words together.

"Do you mean the Rika who resides in the east hospital wing? I have to chat with her?"

"Yes. She comes from outside the town. I think it would perturb her to come to an unfamiliar town without any friends at her

company. If you have free time, could you find her and speak a few words with her? If you are willing to do so, then I'll remove the long bench."

"Is that the requirement you're saying?"

"Yeah."

I should have raised my sense of vigilance back then. How would something so easy and profitable exist on earth.

"Okay. I'm fine."

Nevertheless, ignorant, I only nodded my head briskly. I didn't know why, but Akiko lifted the two edges of her lips and showed a smile.

"Thanks. It might be quite difficult first, as she's a nice girl."

- Cough...

Having stood up in ward room 225, I cleared my throat silently. It was to make myself more calm, as Akiba Rika's room was just at the other side of the door. I study in a school employing coeducation, so girls weren't rare to me; I had once even have a fight with the girls in my class. By the way, I lost in the fight since I clumsily grasped her breast as I fought. The soft feeling freaked me out, dazzling me and wrecking fear in my mind. My frantic opponent took advantage of this spare time to punch the hell out of me. I could still remember the hot and spicy feeling on my cheeks for a total period of three minutes. Just in short, girls weren

't rare to me. But still, to pay a visit to a girl I had never met would make me nervous. I glared hardly on the booklet in my hands. It was written by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, someone I had only seen in my textbook. It was alleged that the girl I was going to meet was a huge fan of Akutagawa Ryunosuke. And thus the following was Akiko's plan: "I would first tell her you also like Akutagawa Ryunosuke, and you can utilise this point to get along with her. It's simple!"

What a crude plan. However I look at it, it was a scheme without any basis. The more I thought about it, the more I felt this plan wouldn't work. Whatever the case was, I wasn't a fan of Akutagawa Ryunosuke, though I had heard of his name, I had never gave a good read of his books. What could I do if something about him was to be thrown out? Akiko bought this booklet for me . If I could have read this book beforehand, then probably it would work. But she suddenly threw it to me a few days ago and forced me to finish it in this short deadline, which was surely impossible. I swiftly turned my back. No way. Probably next time when I had first read the book. When I started my footsteps...

Crank!

A sound came to my ears. As I was emerged in my thoughts, my arms had carelessly clutched the knob, making me lose my balance and slam onto the door.

Then, a louder sound was heard.

Following that was a girl's sound from the back of the door, " Who's there?"

Nervousness rushed through my whole body. While I was numb, the sound repeated again, “Who is it? Who’s there?”

I swallowed my breath gingerly. I couldn’t escape now. If I were to be found getting away at the spot, I was dead meat. There wouldn’t be a second chance, and the long bench would revive. Right. This was the courage a man should summon.

I breathed deeply and opened the door.

“Hello...”

With that said, I entered.

It was a single ward, having the size of about six tatamis. There was a washing dish and a mirror, with flowers visitors had left immersing in the washing dish. The only bed in the room was placed right in front of the windows and the door. The bed was the hospital’s unique iron-made hard bed that—under use of many years—the white paint on the bed had already fallen off. Every old hospital had completely white curtains and beds. Even the walls, the floor, and the ceiling were white as snow. The girl was now in the room, alone, in a space that would mess up one’s perception of distance, exactly like an abandoned child.

“Eh...”

Surprised, she sat up in a hurry. As if trying to cover—or trying to protect herself—she pulled her bed sheets to her chest, looking lovely and charming. I couldn’t help gulping my saliva.

"Are you that person Tanizaki spoke of?"

Her voice was extremely light. Originally, I was first wondering who was Tanizaki, but then I remembered it was the surname of Akiko. Having gotten used to calling her name, I couldn't react to her surname at the moment. I nodded my head in confusion.

"Yes!"

As I suddenly remembered, I showed her the Akutagawa Ryunosuke booklet that was in my hands. She smiled, seemingly delighted.

"I've read this one."

"Ah, oh."

"Have you read it too?"

How could I say I didn't read it?

"Seems so."

I pretended a smile, trying to get away with it. It felt like our discussion was heading somewhere nasty already...

"What's the matter?"

"Umm..."

How could I know anything about the book? I had never read it .

"The 'honey tangerine' was the part I loved the most in the story. Although it was short and undecorated, it was a really superb story, do you think so?"

"Ah. Yeah. Right."

I started to feel worried and perturbed. She slowly talked about the details of the story, like the endings, which I had no idea. Without anything else to say, I could just agree with her and try to get away with it, but of course these tricks wouldn't work forever. Her emotions gradually sunk. Although I wanted to derail the topic, I couldn't think up of anything to talk about. The more worried I got, the blanker my mind became, and my situation was getting worse quickly.

"Did you really read the book?" asked she, at last.

"..."

I fell silent, as I was not a good liar. If I were one, I wouldn't find myself in this difficult situation. She also fell silent, looking at me steadily.

She just stared at me.

She just stared at me.

There weren't any emotions on her face. Her eyes hid no emotions. I felt really bad, to the worst point. I would have never even fathomed I would be stared at by a girl like this. Her eyes had long cut me apart in a thousand slices. Without even having done anything, she knew everything. At that instant did I knew at last I had destroyed something very precious.

I was such a helpless idiot. I had destroyed the only chance given to me...

I could never get it back. In this world, everything couldn't be reversed once it had happened. When a flower vase fells onto the floor, it will be crushed. When you don't store well your progress in your video game, all your information will be completely lost. Once you hurt somebody, you will be hated. Nothing could be reversed or changed back to its original state. It was a dismal state. Although Akiko's plan had its own problems, the one destroying everything was myself. It was all because of my rashness and stupidity. If I could change my feelings and pull out a prank, perhaps there would be room to go back and produce a chance for our relationship to improve. However, everything was too late. After some time, she averted her eyes off of me and to the windows. I had also subconsciously followed her eyes and looked afar. There was a small mountain, the Dragon Head Mountain. To me, born and raised up here, the Turret Mountain sounded better to me. In this long time, she just simply gazed at the mountain. I stood at my original position, unable to fight off the uneasiness off of me. Although I knew I should apologise to her, I couldn't find the appropriate timing to say it. I couldn't stay like this. Perhaps she was waiting for me to commence.

"Um..." I summoned my courage, but at that moment...

"Let me ask you. Do you know that mountain?" she asked, facing the mountain.

"That mountain?"

"Yes. The mountain over there."

"Do you mean the Turret Mountain?"

With that said, she quickly turned to face me in a hurry.

“What did you say just now?”

“Ah?”

“Just now. Just now.”

“Um...I said the Turret Mountain.”

“Is this the name of that mountain?” she asked in high spirits, her eyes dead serious.

Cowered a bit by her strong eyes, I tried my best to explain, “ Since long ago, there were forts on that mountain. So, the locals call it by this name.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Yes.”

She turned around to face that mountain again. Silence fell between us again. But unlike last time, there was a bit of embarrassment hidden in the silence. She wasn’t deliberately neglecting me, but she had some reason to gaze at that mountain.

I said behind her, “Um...I’m sorry for what I’ve done there.”

“Ah?”

She turned around to face me. Her face was full of question marks, unable to understand what I was talking about.

"Akiko, that is, Tanizaki, said it would be better if we had a common thing to talk about, so she gave me this..." I handed the book to her. "And told me to bring it with me. I didn't lie to you on purpose. Um, I...sorry."

Everything would end here. Most likely, I wouldn't have a chance to talk with her again. She would most likely take me as a big liar of some sort. Yet, out of the blue, she smiled.

"I forgive you."

"Ah?'

"This is because you have discovered for me something I have been looking for."

"Ah?"

I had no idea what she was talking about. Looking at my puzzled face, she smiled again, "I have a requirement though."

"Requirement?"

By the way, I was also requested by some 'requirement' by Akiko. Oh, probably girls liked to raise 'requirements'...

"You have to follow my instructions obediently no matter what I request. Should I say I want something, you have to think of how

to get it for me. Should I say I want to smile, you will have to say something funny or joyful to make me smile. Under this requirement, I'm willing to forgive you."

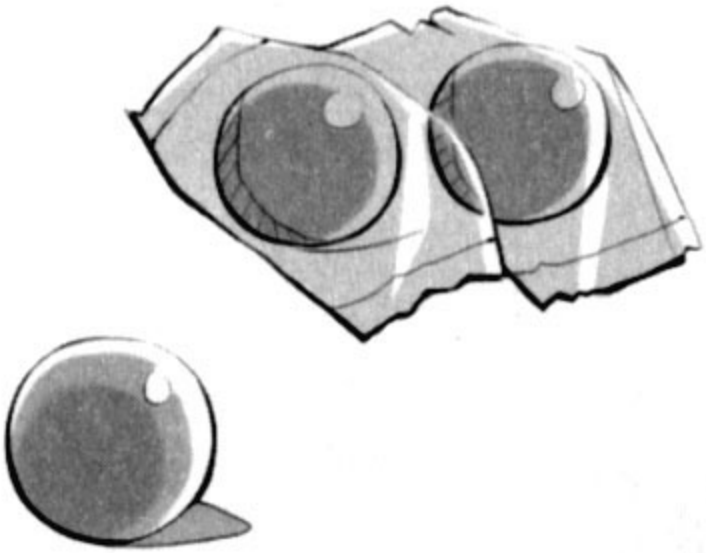
She smiled again, but the smile had a malicious intent hidden within. It was like the smile of a little devil.

"Yeah, okay."

I nodded my head, unknowing of what would happen. Merely having forgiven was enough to excite me and let me fly. At this moment, I wasn't aware of what was happening, completely unaware that I had approached a swamp, my whole body gradually sinking inside. The swamp was shockingly deep, and once one drowns within, one couldn't pull back. Nevertheless, I had no cognition of this. And to be brief, the days of my life as a servant began.

Chapter 2: Our World Has Its End

第二話 僕たちの終わりある世界



Rika was a beautiful girl. Her long hair was so straight and lustrous it could be used in shampoo commercials. Her skin was so white as if it came from the country of snow; it was so fine, smooth , and dazzling. The white and black formed so strong a comparison that captivated anyone around her. Even her organs were so fine and well-shaped one would think it was definitely unfair for someone to have such beauty. She was like a Japanese doll, delicate, gentle, and beautiful. But—But! There was a saying that stated our God is fair: there would always be both sides to a coin—though I wouldn't know if this was a sound explanation for her. Anyway, Rika's personality was poor and scary. She was so self-centred and capricious, and she didn't pay any heed to what others said. If something might go against her will, she would cry, growl, and even say something rude or even take it physically. There was only one girl I knew in the world that there would be such huge disparity in her personality and appearance.

"I'm back," I said with a weary voice, opening the door of the ward.

Laying on the bed, Rika seemed unhappy.

"Why are you so late?" asked she.

On a side note, I went to the public library today for an errand and had just come back. It was deadly cold this morning, and the anchor for the weather forecast asserted as if he made a huge achievement, "Today is the coldest today of this year!" He looked very proud of himself, and there were some snowman dancing around with scarfs for no special reason. In fact, it was so cold I

couldn't bear it. The wind was fierce, striking in my blood and bones the coldness and chilliness. Deep, grey clouds covered the sky. I wore an excessively heavy, thick coat, a scarf, gloves, and journeyed my long road to the public library while holding my defence against the strong wind. Even the tips of my fingers were numb, and my face felt a bit pain, as if it was damaged in the cold weather. In short, I went through a lot of pain this morning. These errands could really stress people out. But at the end, all I got was only a "Why are you so late?" response. I really didn't get how women think. Rika was so capricious, like she was a queen or something.

"Have you found the book?"

"Yeah."

I handed the book to her from my pocket. The book was as large as my palm, the cover with adorable rabbits. Lying on her bed, Rika took the book directly.

"What is this?"

Her face slumped instantly, her elegant eyebrows rising at the same time.

I said nervously, "This is the book you asked me to find...Peter Rabbit..."

"This is in fact one of the books in the Peter Rabbit series, but I wanted you to borrow another one."

"I-Is that so?"

"I want to read the The Tale of Flopsy Bunnies!"

Rika's voice become more and more stern.

"What you borrow is apparently The Scary and Horrifying Rabbits!"

"But didn't you say this one would also be fine?"

Rika's order had many complicated requirements. She asked me to borrow this one, but that one if I couldn't, and then I would have to borrow another one if I couldn't borrow this one...these orders were too complicated for me, so I even wrote her orders word by word on a sheet of paper and brought it out with me.

"How did you listen to my orders? That one was the one I said to never borrow!"

"I-Is that so?"

I frantically flipped open my jacket pocket, but I couldn't find that sheet of paper. Was it on the right side? No. It wasn't. How about the left side? Perhaps it was in the pocket of my pants. I had gone through almost every pocket in the clothes I was wearing, yet I couldn't find the sheet of paper. Had I lost it? My, this is too terrible. If I were to tell her this, I would definitely get reprimanded. I lowered my head with a wan face.

"Ah..."

There it was. A crumpled piece of paper fell to my feet's side. I kneeled down to pick it up. Hahaha. There it was. As I showed a delightful smile, I unfolded the piece of paper. My messy writing was dancing around on that crumpled piece of paper. As what Rika said, I had put an X mark beside The Scary and Horrifying Rabbits. I must have forgotten about the mark when I was picking the book.

"Ha-haha. My, my. Why would I have forgotten the mark?"

I tried to alleviate the tension and squeeze a smile, but it didn't work out. Rika's anger was as its verge of explosion.

"You idiot! Can't you do such simple things? How old are you? You're not a child anymore!"

Sigh. I had to be scolded anyhow.

"But I'm still seventeen, who could be counted as a child."

My grotesque protest was instantly frozen under Rika's gaze.

"S-Sorry," I scratched my head while apologising.

It was only three days since we first encountered, yet I couldn't say a thing against this woman already. Once I hear Rika's orders, I would have to listen to her and obey to her orders. Once she throws a tantrum, I would have to apologise immediately without another word. Even if it wasn't my fault, I would always lower my

head in apology. I had already become her little subordinate. Certainly it was because of the deep, negative effects of our first encounter. I had utterly succumbed to her.

Rika briskly said, “Please borrow the correct book this time.”

“Ah?”

“Again. Please borrow the book I’ve said.”

“Now? I’m just back!”

It was terrible. I was, at the least note, a patient living in the hospital—a patient that would decline visitors a month ago. Even though I was allowed to go out now, I couldn’t really get out and run around like this. This wouldn’t be good for my body. Rest was essential for my sickness to be cured. Nevertheless, Rika just briskly said, “The one who made the mistake is you.”

“It’s very cold today. Besides, if I go out now, the sun would have already set when I come back...”

“What about that then?”

“...”

“I’m asking you: what about that then?”

Rika stared directly at me. The colour of her eyes were so rich and appalling. Looking at those eyes, I would sometimes discover a pool of black water was now incessantly rolling about. Then I would feel if my body was engulfed in those of eyes of Rika’s.

After that episode, whenever I was alone, there would be this strange acidulous feeling rushing into my chest. Now, Rika still stares at me with those eyes.

"I know. I'll go now."

"If you don't hurry up, the doors of the library will be closed."

"I will hurry up a bit and borrow the book."

With that said, I got out of the ward.

It was too cold outside. Perhaps it was because of the sun's departure to the west, the temperature seemed to have dropped down a bit. The wind blowing onto me felt even colder than before . The east side of the sky was also gradually dimming.

"I'm completely devastated by her," said I, puffing out a breath, which was instantly frozen into white matter. I coiled my scarf around my neck for several times, zipped up my jacket, and started my journey. My whole self felt heavy, perhaps my body condition was bit poor. The next check-up was scheduled a week later, maybe the results would turn out worse. Rika's eyes appeared in my head. Why would Rika show such eyes?

As a result, I didn't come in time for dinner, so I hadn't have any dinner that night. As I held my hungry and empty stomach, I walked into Rika's ward. The room was pitch black, with a bit of light scattered in through the windows, faintly outlining the contours of a girl. Rika was sitting on her bed, gazing beyond the windows.

"Why don't you turn on the lights? What's the matter?" asked I.

She gave no response.

"I've borrowed the book for you. It's the right book this time."

She still gave no response. I approached the edge of the bed and placed the book on the bed. Afterwards, I sat on the fold chair beside the bed. Rika wasn't moving an inch. She kept silent and didn't turn around to face me. I could clearly hear the small television sounds from the adjacent ward, and some other conversational sounds of passerbys walking through the wards. There were also different kinds of sounds, including the squeaking sounds of medical carts being pushed along, or the banging sounds of something falling to he floor. Perhaps it was because of my contraction with warm air that my mind had become a bit dazed off, as if I was floating in a dream. With that dizzy head, I took off my scarf and gloves, and blew some warm air onto my

hands. My tips of my fingers were so numb by the bold that they couldn't feel the warmth. At this moment, time was slowly flying away. Rika was still gazing beyond the windows. To be correct, she was still gazing at the Dragon Head Mountain—the Turret Mountain. She seemed completely ignorant of my presence.

Of course, she knew I was here, but she didn't make a sound. Long accustomed to this, I only gazed blankly at the direction she was gazing. This would happen about once every day. Rika would suddenly fall silent without any omen. Should this happen, it was useless for me to say anything. Even if I were to talk to her, she would pay no heed even if she heard me. She would, at most, make some sounds to skimp me, which was the best I could hope for. She had a distance from me usually, but when this happened, it felt that she was even farther away from me—so far that even if I stretched my hands I couldn't touch her. So I could only resort to silence. I could only bear silence. Then, I might try to imagine what she would be thinking now and then. What is she thinking? Why is she staring at the Turret Mountain? Does she want to climb that mountain? As I thought of these, I repeatedly blew on my hands; my hands could gradually feel the warmth now. Although these doubts in my heart could be directly sent to Rika for an answer, I hadn't ever thought of this, as I wouldn't get a response anyway. If I had to feel the sensation of words disappearing in the atmosphere after being said, let me just bear silence and keep it in my heart. Without any other resort, I just looked at Rika's back like an idiot. She had a slim and tender body. It was because she was sitting on her bed that I could just see her upper body, but that, including her shoulders to her waist, was enough to be described as perfect. The curve of her body was extremely elegant. Merely looking at it would accelerate one's heartbeat. By the way, humans are such fascinating creatures. Why would just a curve be so charming to one? For example, the curve of a flower vase would be elegant, but why wouldn't it accelerate one's heartbeat? Nevertheless, Rika was bit too thin. The slimness of her body had a

sorrowful remark. I suddenly remembered Akiko's words, "She's doing fine." I didn't know what illness Rika had. Akiko didn't tell me, and I didn't find it comfortable to ask Rika. How could I? I mean—how could I just ask her such a question. Besides, to be honest, I was afraid of the answer. So, until then, I was totally ignorant of it.

Grumble...

This sound suddenly reminded me—it was my stomach's growling sound. Even though my body had fallen into deep contemplation of different matters, my body was very loyal to its physiological status. My stomach would growl naturally when hungry.

Rika turned to me.

"I-I'm sorry," I apologised without thinking.

What a hell of a shit I was. Rika's expression was unclear in the dim room. Perhaps she was gasping. Although it was too inconceivable for one to throw a tantrum for a growling stomach, the reason why I didn't have my dinner was all Rika's fault, but it was hard to convince her sometimes even with reasons. I stood gingerly, as I thought she would throw a tantrum at me again.

"Um. Please take this for dinner."

Yet, this was what I heard.

"Ah?"

I couldn't make up what she was saying, as I was too astonished.

"Eat it."

Rika pointed at the shelf beside the door. On the shelf was a tray containing the dinner set the hospital provided. Rice, other food, and soup was all placed there neatly. Surprised, I asked, " How did you get this?"

"It's your dinner. I've brought it here."

"Did you help me to take my dinner?"

She nodded. Every evening, the staff responsible for the food would send the food for every patient to their respective wards. And my dinner should be sent to my ward, which would be taken away after a specified time whether I had eaten it or not. And at this time, it should have been long taken away, yet Rika went to my ward specially to take away my dinner, lest it be taken away. I was way too astonished. I couldn't even dream that such a capricious woman would do such a favour for me. When I was still gasping in awe...

"Aren't you going to eat it?" asked Rika, "if you aren't, then it's better to throw it away."

"Ah. No. I'm going to eat it! I'm eating it now!"

"You can use this to help you eat it," said Rika as she moved her body to open the table beside her bed.

"You can also turn on the lights."

"Okay. Thanks."

I turned on the lights and transferred the tray onto the table.

Having seated on the chair, I quickly picked up the chopsticks. The rice, the other food, and the soup had already turned cold, but because it was my hunger that the food was extremely delicious. I devoured them in big mouthfuls. No, perhaps there were other reasons that made this meal delicious. Seeing me devouring the food, Rika smiled in delight.

"Yuuichi looks like a dog."

This line may seem like disdaining someone in some circumstances, but this strangely gave me the otherwise. I lifted my head carefully to see Rikas delightful smile—her smile that was as beautiful as those of angels. Wouldn't it be great if she could smile like this forever...I thought while I devoured the food.

"What's the matter?" asked Rika with her head cocked, sensing the direction of my eyes.

I replied hastily, "This is delicious."

"How would anyone think food provided by the hospital is delicious? Yuuichi is acting strange."

"I'm not. This food is splendid."

"All right. Then please eat more."

Like pacifying a dog, Rika lightly stroked my head. Of course, this wouldn't disgust me. Rika's light touch sliding across my hair along with her smile elated me. I deliberately shoved my face into the bowl, lest my thoughts would be unveiled.

As I returned to my ward, I met Tada.

"Have you gone somewhere again?" Tada said, opening his mouth devoid of teeth, smiling, "is it a girlfriend?" He raised his little finger.[1] How do I put it? Tada was a real old guy as well as a perverted one. These senses had already become his 'initial settings'.

"Hahaha" I tried to skimp him by smirking, "I was finding my friend."

She was my friend instead of my girlfriend.

"Sigh, why's that? Shouldn't vigour be the greatest at your age? Let me tell you: you need to be more active and strike when possible."

Tada had an awkward accent. It was alleged that his messy tone came from him going through different places in the country. Albeit this hearsay, most of the words spoken by Tada was exaggerated, so I couldn't tell how much of the hearsay was true. I had also heard that he had a trip to Hokkaido, but then he strangely said Hiroshima was in Hokkaido; when I corrected him by saying that Hiroshima was situated at Chugoku in the west side of Honshu, he still stood strong in his fallacious argument that

there had been a time when that happened. What a stubborn old man.

"Hahaha," I skimped him by smirking again.

Afterwards, he stretched his hand to me.

"Take this and eat it."

After Tada stretched his hand, three amber-coloured round objects appeared on my palm. They were the memorable old sugar balls. The three sweet ambers glittered with beautiful radiance.

"Thanks," said I, nodding.

Having returned to my ward, I popped one of them into my mouth. I was caught by the extreme sweetness of the ball when it touched my taste buds, which then was quickly spitted out of my mouth, hitting on the floor and rolling on the floor forlornly. How could I eat something like this?

"This candy is too sweet."

What should I do? I looked at the two left sugar balls, unknowing of how to deal with them. Tsukasa's room was situated at the first floor and facing the road. Nowhere could be more dangerous than here. Anyone could throw a rock, shatter the glasses, and slip in. Notwithstanding, it was great for some visitors like me since I could slip in the room at night through the

windows without making a noise and interrupting others. Or to put it in another way, I could freely enter or leave the room anytime I wanted.

"Hey."

After the lock—the bench—was unlocked, I immediately paid a visit to Tsukasa's room. The moment I opened the windows, a twenty-five inch man's face entered my eyes. That guy was wearing a lantern sleeve, the curve of his waist almost the same as a woman. His hand was holding a rapidly spinning foam generator. A sharp sound came from the speakers of the television: "Here comes the main point, yo!" What did 'yo' mean? What was this 'yo' shit? Pretending to heave a large sigh, I entered, saying, " My friend, don't you think there is a problem with a boy watching the playback of Hirose Yoshikazu's Happy Kitchen with such a serious attitude?"

"Does it matter?" said Tsukasa sternly.

Sekoguchi Tsukasa was a bit of a weird guy. Let me first tell you that he was an astronomy fan, so he would always put in his pockets scientific calculators used for working out orbits. Anyway, let us leave this alone since this was common. What I am going to tell you now is his features: his height and weight are 187cm and 92 kilograms respectively. Anyway, let us leave this alone since this was common too. Perhaps this was because of his usual serious practice that made muscles as strong as steel to cover his whole body. Anyway, this was perhaps common too. The problem comes down to this: his interest was making deserts. Frequently after school, he would hold small measuring spoons in his huge

hands and make deserts with female students in the home education room. And the most puzzling thing was that the deserts he made were better than any other deserts made by female students, so delicious that even the girls gave him the venerable nickname 'Sekoguchi Master', and often threw letters of admiration into his shoe cabinet in school. This was what I couldn't understand.

"You haven't been around for some time. What's the matter?" asked Tsukasa, looking at Hirose Yoshikazu dancing around crazily on the television—at least this what I thought, though it seemed he was cooking.

Originally, I wanted to explain why everything ended up like this, but then I gave up in doing so, as Tsukasa was totally immersed in the television.

"There's a lot that happened. Let's talk about that later since you're so busy."

It was just a waste of energy to tell Tsukasa anything at the moment.

"Is that so? I'm sorry," said Tsukasa, seemingly uninterested to what I was saying, "Hey! Did you see that? That's the god's foam!"

What a weirdo. What the heck was that 'god's foam'? I had thought he was joking, but without further examination, I found him serious and stern. He was putting all his focus on a big notebook—normal notebooks on Tsukasa's hands look like booklets—and jotting down some notes. Finally, Hirose Yoshikazu

jumped up to mid-air and spun around. While he was spinning in the air, his hands danced around and his feet relaxed into a bending state. At this moment, special effects occurred on the screen: butterflies and stars flew around the sky, and light was shone to all corners.

"Fascinating illusion!" cried Hirose Yoshikazu as he landed. Afterwards, a pure, white cake appeared on the screen. It was indeed a fine, delicious cake, but a cake was merely a cake. What did that cake have to do with any fascinating illusions? Or perhaps , this essentially was a 'fascinating illusion'. With these questions in my mind, I looked at Tsukasa. Stars shone in his eyes. His mouth was half-wide, his eyes locked onto the television firmly. Along with that, he kept on murmuring, "This is spectacular..."

I heaved a deep sigh, a sigh deep down from my heart: if only this guy didn't have this hobby, he would have been perfect. The show ended at last after some time.

Tsukasa stared at the sandstorm-like flashing screen absent-mindedly. He seemed to be still enjoying the aftertaste. Getting impatient, I called for him, “Hey, Tsukasa.”

“Y-Yes,” replied Tsukasa, confused, coming back to his senses.

He had really lost his senses back there.

“Are you okay?” asked I, having a hidden meaning within my words. I didn’t know did he get it, as his response was only a simple nod.

“Of course. Hey, did you just see Hirose’s special move?”

It looked as if he didn’t get it.

“I saw it, but I have no idea of what he’s doing.”

“Tsk!” said Tsukasa, displeased. He then stood up, took off the jacket hung on the wall, and stretched his hands into its sleeves.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

“Sorry. Some relatives came and lived here. They are very annoying, so it wouldn’t be a good idea to disturb their sleep. Let’s head outside.”

“Outside? Have you thought of where to go?”

It was already midnight. There were few and far between shops that still run at this time in these suburban places.

"Yes. I have a senior working at a Karaoke shop. We can probably enter without being charged."

"Karaoke, uh?"

I was tone-deaf. It wasn't any exaggeration. I would even have a discrepancy of half a note in theme songs of children shows.

"We don't necessarily have to sing," complemented Tsukasa, probably putting what I have mind in consideration.

Though his face and body looked thick and rigid, he was a gentle and kind man. When he was cooking, the true essence of his personality would shine.

I said, half-jokingly, "Okay. Let me sing the theme song of ' Prince Mackaroo'[2] then."

"D-Do you really have to sing?" Tsukasa showed a sign of apparent disgust.

This guy didn't simply said that for me but also as a preventive measure of escaping my singing voice...

Tsukasa and I weren't yet friends half a year ago. Back then, we didn't have anything in common; we were simply classmates. It was because of that guy's eccentricity that made him difficult to approach, hence a legend at school. At normal circumstances, I would have never thought of becoming friends with him. We hadn 't spoken to a word to each other back then. It was that rain that bridged the gap between us. It was the drizzling rain that would never cease during the spring season. I was returning home from cram school on that day. In the individual conversation with the tutor for furthering my studies, all of the schools I want to go to were marked by a 'D', shocking me at the spot. The teacher of the cram school had his face crumpled.

"Looks like you need to lower your standard of the schools you want to go to," he said, seemingly impatient. Though he had a formal tone, it was written all on his face that I needed to rewrite all of my standards before finding him. As such, I was drenched in melancholy, as mum, if seen my grades, would definitely say, "It'll be fine if you study in local universities." Even when I further my studies, my mum still wished for me to stay in this town, although she always said, "Anything you prefer will be fine," every time my will for schools was mentioned, she would recommend local schools. If I had to get out of here, I must get grades at least up to standard. Getting a 'D' was the worst I could get.

"What could I do?" murmured I, gazing upon the drizzle of rain falling from the sky.

"It's all my stupidity that led me into this."

Rain poured incessantly, my mood dejected to the worst point. After that, I passed through the old station, which still had the lookout for fire strangely, and the track into the shortcut to my home—"Seko". Seko was a dialect that meant a short path. It was alleged that it was a saying that started long ago and had passed till now. There were a lot of people like Tsukasa who had this word as their names. In some places, there would be around three students in a class called Sekokuchi. The first girl I loved—which was back when I was at primary school grade three—had the surname Sekoguchi. These cases would only happen in towns with such a long history. The history memories in my mind would sometimes appear in the roads I walked in, for example: wooden houses that were common and special here. The openings of these houses were very narrow, yet the endings would extend to a far distance. They would probably be described commonly as eel houses. It was alleged that this style was also called Tsumairi houses (妻). I walked to this house, my head lowered. Afterwards, I went through a corner, and a large body appeared before me. Looking at the distinctive face and body, I immediately knew he was Sekoguchi Tsukasa. But why was he kneeling along the road in this rain? I went over to him and threw some glances, happening to find there were two kittens purring beside Tsukasa's feet. They looked like abandoned, stray cats. I knew what was happening right at that instant. To put it simply, a big guy found some kittens abandoned near his house, and so he took an umbrella and covered them. And so, now he was idling around, unknowing of what to do next. Kittens like these would die soon. It was preposterous for one to think that these abandoned kittens would be taken away by strangers. Abandoning them was equivalent to murdering them. When I was in middle school, there

were some kittens abandoned at school. These kittens were so adorable that a lot of people would feed them. These kittens seemed to live with vigour and life. I would always stroke the soft fur on their backs, and they would make purring sounds from their throats, which was truly adorable. Merely looking at the sight of them sleeping lazily under the sun would incur a sense of happiness deep down in my heart. Nevertheless, these kittens were gone after the holidays. I couldn't imagine who picked them away. Though it felt a bit lonely for them to be gone, whenever I imagine they could at last eat something delightful in someone's house, I would reckon them having a wonderful life. You have to eat more and grow up, I would sometimes think. The unpalatable truth wasn't what I thought though. Not long after, I heard from the girls along the corridor news I didn't want to hear: "Hey, I heard that those kittens were dead." "Eh~~ Really?" "It seemed that after the holidays, our janitor saw them in a corner of a bicycle parking lot, their bodies shrinking into a clump. He thought they were alive and tried to feed them, only to see that they didn't move an inch. Feeling strange, he stretched out his hands to touch them, finding their bodies already become cold and icy." "What happened then? Were they buried?" "No. I heard they were thrown to the burnable trash." "What? That's gross! Bother!" You're the one that are gross, you idiot! I reprimanded them scornfully in my heart, though the girls were right. Then, I become dejected: how is she an idiot? Do I qualify to speak those kinds of words? Have I considered the fact that those kittens couldn't endure? What have I done? Did I ever think of doing anything? The kittens were fed nothing during the holidays. Besides, heavy rain poured at those times. Kittens could have never endured through this harsh weather. Every time when I think of the kittens—their soft

fur and the warmth within—my heart would grieve, drenching me into melancholy. With this melancholy, I still walked gingerly around Tsukasa's back. After all, there was nothing I could help. Besides, I was afraid of going through the same grief might I join. The softness and warmth of the dead kittens in the bicycle parking lot induced the acceleration of my footsteps naturally. Wherever I went, the sound of rain followed me. Every time I remembered Tsukasa's back, I would quickly try to cast it away from my mind. Having gone back home, time flew as I did my usual stuff: eat, watch the television, and read manga—it was yet another usual and boring day—or so I thought: I heard my mother's call at around ten at night: "Yuuichi, your friend is here for you."

Who would come to find me at this time? I walked to the gates with this question in my mind, surprised to find Sekoguchi Tsukasa standing here. He was drenched from head to toe, his chest holding kittens wrapped in towels. "U-Um...I'm sorry for coming to find you all of a sudden," said Tsukasa, timidly, "could you take care of the cats?"

I was speechless. Tsukasa and I were classmates, but we weren't close to each other. Why would he find me? Perhaps he saw me when I passed him, I guess, getting perturbed suddenly. I asked, fidgeting, "Why would you come to my..." House—I wanted to say, which I stopped when I saw a piece of paper buried in Tsukasa's chest. Like his clothes and body, the paper was soaked in rain, and the contents were therefore exposed: "Contact List of the Class"—this was what I could vaguely see. In other words, Tsukasa had went through each and every house of his classmates to see if anyone could take up the cats for him. ''What an idiot'', I thought. ''What is he thinking?'' Despite being completely

drowned in the rain, he wanted to, at least, find someone to adopt those abandoned cats. And he worked to the night for this. It was already ten. I was astounded as well as impatient in some sense. Nevertheless, while I was in my thoughts, I found that Tsukasa was only holding one cat. When I saw him at Seko, there were two cats.

"H-Hey. Where's the other cat?"

"My classmate Kato adopted it."

He sounded happy to have said classmate's name. It was a naive and straight smile. I bet he had really been at cloud nine for this. Then, as if finding something strange, he made a squeaking sound.

"Ezaki, how did you know there were two cats?"

"Oh."

I was a goner. He didn't know I passed through him there. I was stumped: how could I tell him that I saw him there? At the same moment, something coming out of nowhere clicked. Looking from the narrow gate of my house, I could see Tsukasa's body larger than usual, which probably could be ascribed to the narrow gate, or probably some other reasons. I sucked my saliva, making rough, loud sounds. The eyes of the kitten lying on Tsukasa's hands looked straight at me mysteriously, its pupils reflecting an image of me, ignorant and striving to hide something. All of these

were clearly reflected on the kitten's pupils. The reflection made me look like a complete idiot, stunning me at the spot. The kitten was purring.

"What's the matter?"

Tsukasa asked me.

"Ah. No."

"Sorry for making such a strange request."

""Ah, right."

"No, isn't it?"

Gingerly I nodded my head.

"My mum is allergic to cats."

"Okay. It's fine."

Tsukasa repeated a few times the word 'sorry'. He was sorry for bothering me at such a late time; he was sorry for having such a request...this repeating behaviour had made me to feel even sorry for him, having to see him nod his head incessantly to show respect. Finally, he left after saying another 'sorry'. With a final click, the door was shut. Here was I, left alone. Yes, I was ditched.

"..."

The rain outside the house drizzled. The lights at the gate were dim. The sounds of my mum watching television inside were heard.

"..."

The scene of Tsukasa being drowned in rain reappeared in my mind. I could still faintly hear the purring sounds of the kitten. Again I remembered myself passing through Tsukasa's back gingerly.

"..."

Perhaps he would run around forever should he not find someone to adopt the kitten.

"What? Has your friend gone home?"

Walking along the corridor, my mum asked with her usual carefree tone. I wanted to say something, but the words just clogged in my throat: my lips shut soon after they were open. There was something running on in my head, hitting my chest. I was like an idiot, having some sound denying my feeling, but this spinning vortex forcibly sucked away my heart. It was stupid to have the heart of a tenderhearted person, yet my feet moved and shoved themselves to my old, worn-out shoes. The shoes were wet , and upon my feet shoving inside, the soggy fabric stuck onto my skin, which felt disgusting. Before my senses came back to me, I had already shouted, "I'm out for a while!" Then, I grabbed an umbrella and hurried out of my house. I looked around frantically,

thinking where that big guy had gone under such copious rain. Having found the right direction, I ran towards there. It wasn't anything worth mentioning anyway. I knew it, of course. However you put it, I was once someone who loved kittens genuinely, and also someone who threw them away without a second thought. I was someone who had thought the kittens would be better off if they were adopted. Thus said, I was irresponsible. Be that as it may, I still could lower my head along with Tsukasa.

"Lightning! Lightning! Boooom!"

We did enter with free admission.

Nevertheless, the store was those cheap stores that could scare customers away. The grape juice I called was as tasteless and plain as running water. Scrapes of paint and holes were found everywhere on the walls. The table was shuddering. Even the soundproof capability was poor: we could clearly hear the singing sounds from the room next to us.

The room next to us seemed to have entered 'endless anime song' mode.

"My earth-wrecking iron first! Garghhh!"

Remarkably shocking was the sound.

Those sound waves passed through the walls and shot straight into our room; even the glass cup on our table was shaking with clinging sounds.

The roaring sounds were increasing in intensity.

“Lightning! Lightning! Booooom!”

Plack, plack: the glass cup vibrated on the table. Tsukasa and I were stumped for a while, as if the vibrating glass cup casted a spell on us: we just stared at the cup. The anime song was such a wonder, I thought. What power it had.

Plack, plack: the glass cup continued to vibrate incessantly.

“How’s school lately?” I asked at the moment the song was in its interlude. Then, taking the vibrating glass cup, I drank some grape juice to dampen my throat—the taste was really plain.

“It’s the same as usual!” cried Tsukasa.

“We had a tripartite talk[3] recently!”

“Yeah. I got the same notice!”

“Hey, how did it go?”

“My mother is going alone.”

We were really screaming our throats out, lest our words would be superseded by the singing sounds from the adjacent room.

“How did the teacher say?”

“Rats!”

Yes, it was perhaps worse than rats. After all, my homework was done poorly. Besides, I was forced to live in the hospital for a long time for being sick. Not only could I not go to school, but I also couldn't go to cram school or take the mock exam. On the next year I would have to take the university entrance exams. Should this keep up, I would be a goner. Although I had tried to revise a bit, my grades worsened gradually. Another problem would be my lack of attendance in school, which would make me in danger of not being able to forward to the next grade.

This was what I heard from my mother who talked with my teacher.

"You can repeat the exam anyway. Isn't there always a way?"

"I'll never repeat the exam!"

'Never'—it would be easier to repeat the exam since there would be an extra year for me to study. If I want to live an easier life, it might be a good way. Still, this would squander one year. I had only lived for seventeen years, so one year was equal to 5.9% of my whole life. Though not everlasting, it was quite an appalling time to me at this moment. Once I had decided to repeat, I would have to spend the time living in this village.

That would be bad. I wanted to travel to other places, albeit one step farther. I wanted to travel to faraway cities, albeit a bit farther.

Having understood my will, Tsukasa made a voice of great agony, "Mmm..."

I echoed, “Mmm..”

Anime songs still came continuously from the adjacent room.

“Lightning bomb! Lightning bomb! Booooooom!”

The lyrics were a bit different from then, probably entering its second phase.

“My space-wrecking valour! Garghhhh!”

I would like to wreck space too, but the thing that was really wrecked was my ‘valour’. I would feel melancholic once I thought of things pertaining to my ‘future’.

Though when I turned my head to Tsukasa, his face was surprisingly stern. It was my affair, not his, yet he looked even agonised than myself.

I liked this friend of mine with a strangely huge body and a peculiar taste. First things first, I didn’t have any other weird connotation. In sorrow, Tsukasa would show a sorrowful face. In joy, he looked joyful. If lonely, he would curl up his backs in loneliness. When he was hungry, his stomach would growl (significantly loud also).

Tsukasa was so straightforward and simple it was scary. Normal people couldn’t do things in his way. Like me, anyone would have some strange blob in our self-conscious, blocking some path in our heart. In sorrow, I would instead laugh out loud. When I looked like a wagging dog in joy, I was really showing a

sense of utter boredom. I was like a super idiot. Nevertheless, knowing that I was such an idiot didn't help at all; there was no way I could show my feelings genuinely like Tsukasa. There was no way I could do what he had done on that rainy day...

The two kittens were growing healthily now, living in serenity and joy. A female student in his adjacent class adopted the second cat. It was alleged he would frequently pay visits to the kitten.

With huge efforts, I managed to put on a large smile.

"Yo, things will mend themselves at the end. If things didn't work out the way I want, there are still those poor, random universities I can choose."

"You can say it like that, but will your mother agree?"

"I can kneel down in request. Don't look at me with that face. I'm good at pushing things at the last moment. I will do my best."

The crying sounds coming from the adjacent room were becoming fiercer.

"Lightning! Lightning bomb! Booooooom!"

The song seemed to have climbed up to the climax.

Everyone in the room added to the chorus. The intensity of their voices was so high that it could be said to have wrecked the sky and perhaps even create sonic beams. There were even female voices embedded within. How many people were there anyway?

Before we knew it, our minds were already washed away by the music.

“My generation-wrecking bawl! Arghhh...” For that moment, I believed, the whole building shook.

No, perhaps it was only a misperception.

The boiling atmosphere near us accentuated, reaching higher temperatures. “Garghhh!” or “Yooooogh!” or “Wuarghh!” charged in endlessly. How could someone be in such high spirits? My shock had elevated into admiration. “What a wonder,” Tsukasa clapped his hands, “what a wonder.” I clapped my hands too. “In short, there will be something you can do, Yuuichi,” Tsukasa, while clapping his hands, showed a faint smile.

On that day, rarely, Rika ran to my ward according to her own will.

“What’s up, Rika?” I asked, quickly stuffing the bookmark into the book.

I was reading a book written by Akutagawa Ryunosuke that Rika lend me. Truth be told, I didn’t want to read that book Akuta-something wrote, but if I refused, I would drive Rika mad again, so I could only choose otherwise. Be that as it may, having started reading the book, I found Akutawa Ryunsuke an interesting person. How should I put it? I thought he was quite the abnormal person.

I asked Rika, who was silent, again, “has something happened? ”

She didn’t answer me and walked towards me in awkward silence.

“Hey, hey.”

Rika took the book from my hands and flipped it, making shuffling sounds. The bookmark was in the book, so the page would always be turned to that page.

“Hey, what do you want!”

My, I have a bad feeling about this.

“You threw the bookmark in upon seeing me coming and closed the book, didn’t you?”

“Y-yeah...”

She was right. Last time, while I was reading, Rika went in like this time. She then took away the book I was holding and closed the book.

Then she said, with a mischievous smile, “Look. Now you won’ t know which page you were reading!”

She was intentionally picking me. How vulgar and malicious it was of her. The one who told me to read the book was she. The one getting worked up should I stop reading was she, yet she would do such a thing. What a strange woman.

Having learnt from my past experience, I had prepared a bookmark this time.

Rika took the bookmark out of the book.

"Hmph! Then let me do this."

She then closed the book.

I let out a dismal cry, "Ahh! What are you doing?"

"This is only a little punishment."

"What are you punishing me for? I didn't commit any crime! I won't know where I have been reading now!"

"You're a man. How noisy you are."

Her adorable face wrinkled.

"Leave this alone. Come with me for a while."

"Oh. What?"

It was a diversion I had not yet been prepared. I didn't even have the time to fully digest what she had said.

"Hey. Be swift."

Nevertheless, Rika seemed to have paid no heed to what I was thinking, walking with her back sticking to me. She opened the door and turned around to face me.

"What are you doing? Come on now."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll know by following me."

Rika's eyes seemed to glitter more ominously.

"Hey. Be swift."

"All right."

I succumbed to her in a few words.

It was only a waste of energy to talk anything with Rika. Although I would like her to give at least an excuse, so we wouldn't have to start a little quarrel. Asking and receiving questions from Rika was always impossible. In times like this, the only thing I could do instead of ignoring her was obeying her. And the most intriguing thing was that I couldn't ignore her. Perhaps it was because she was a beautiful girl. I stood up, my feet slipping into my slippers.

"Okay. Let's go."

I was exactly like the faeces of a goldfish, walking closely behind Rika's back. Be that as it may, I was still guessing where she was taking me. Walking like this was boring, so I began to observe her back: today, Rika was wearing two-pieced striped pajamas. The size of the pajamas seemed a big too big of her, as half of her hands were buried in the sleeves. Nevertheless, she had such a small body. How would it feel to embrace her? She would completely immerse in the shoulders.

When Rika stepped out her right foot, the thin pajamas cloth would show the contours of her left shoulder blade, and when she stepped out her left, the contours of the right one would be shown. When I slowly looked downwards, seeing the curve along her waist, I couldn't help feeling mixed and excited. My face gradually flushed. (Sigh. Why am I so evil? I am such a...)

'A boy of seventeen'—it sounds like the congregation of impure objects. Probably having noticed my wicked eyes, Rika turned her head around. Consequently, our eyes met with each other. For a moment I was immersed into extreme anxiety.

"W-What?"

Did she notice I was eyeing her all along? If that was the truth, her rage would be boiling over the tip, and she might even slap me harshly on the face.

"W-What's the matter?"

Rika didn't answer me. She turned her head back and continued walking. I had no idea what she was thinking.

"Hey, Rika."

"What?"

"Where are we heading to?"

"You'll know by following me."

"Does it matter if you tell me or not? The only place we can go is this hospital anyway. Are you going to fetch some juice in the restaurant?"

"You're a man. Why are you so noisy."

Her tone sounded like deterring detestable mosquitoes.

"Just follow me and keep your mouth shut."

I heaved a long sigh.

My, how would there be such a willful girl? Perhaps, I had to sternly look at her for once. Again for killing time, I imagined

myself talking to Rika condescendingly—right, to talk to her sternly and viciously, roaring to her things such as “What you blabbering about. Shut up.”

(Hell. There’s no way I can imagine something like that...)

But I could, without a problem, imagine myself fawning and doing as she pleased.

While I was thinking about these things, Rika stopped at the end of the corridor. A door with two openings was in front of us. These were the words written on the top of the door—“Operating Room”. While I was still pondering over its authenticity, my doubts came to become reality immediately, as Rika had already entered the operation room.

“Hey, hey, Rikia.”

I followed her in a panic.

“Stop! We would be scolded!”

“It’s fine. If we’re scolded, I’d say it was Yuuichi who pulled us both in. I’m good at faking a cry.”

Although Rika was smiling, I had a feeling she wasn’t joking.

“Have you entered the operation room, Yuuichi?”

“No.”

“Me either. So the operation room looks like this.”

Rika and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder, looking around the interior of the room. It was larger than I had imagined; it was almost twice the size of a six-persons room. There was a shelf occupying most of the wall. And there were some things that look like oxygen tanks placed in the corner of the room. There were also other various instruments placed everywhere in the room. The only ones I knew were the electrocardiogram monitor and the drip rack. Finally, in the centre of the room was the operating table. On the operating table laid a black cushion, covered with a green sheet . There was a bendable lighting device on top of it. There were ten light blubs aligned inside with equal distance.

"Yuuichi, will you lie down?" said Rika, slapping on the operating table.

"I...lie down...?"

"Are there anyone else?"

Rika seemed unusually delighted. She grinned ear to ear. By the way, this was the first time I saw Rika in such delight. At the same time, I found out that she looked hundreds of thousands times adorable when she was elated than when infuriated. I never thought she could be such adorable. How good it would be if she were to be in such good mood every day.

"Cough, cough," Rika intentionally cleared her throat.

"So let's start the operation."

"What?"

"Let's first start from the place between your Adam's apple and chest, cutting open your chest as well as the sternum. When the heart is exposed, we'll use an artificial pacemaker to maintain the flow of blood..."

I tensed up.

"W-Wait! What are you holding in your hands?"

"A surgical knife."

"A s-surgical knife!"

The fine, long silver blade glimmered in Rika's hands. "Kuku," as Rika smiled, she pointed the surgical knife at me.

"Stop! Hey, cut it out. How did you get that?"

"It was placed here."

Rika pointed at the cart beside the operating table. Casting a glance, I saw there neatly placed instruments such as surgical knives, injection needles, and scissors.

"Trust me. It will be fine."

"What trust are you talking about! What do you want me to trust?"

"So let's begin," continued Rika with a playful tone. She then drew the surgical knife closer. The knife flashed an icy light; the moment the light reached my retina, I wanted, inwardly, to cry out loud.

At the same moment...

"Who's inside?"

The door of the operating room suddenly opened, along with a calling sound—it was Akiko! In a flurry, Rika kneeled down, while I directly rolled onto the floor from the side of the operating table. Although my waist and my back fell onto the floor flatly, I stood the pain and crept below the operating table where Rika had already hidden herself. So confined was the space that there were not any space left to move. Rika and I were facing each other, our knees touching.

(Hey, stop coming closer!)

(I can't help it!)

(Oh, you touched it! Rats. You idiot. You pervert!)

(S-Stop hitting me! We'd get discovered! Hey!)

We moved our lips and had a quarrel with our "lip language".

Akiko made cracking footstep sounds as she walked around the operating room. She should be checking the room to see if anyone was around. Her footstep sounds gradually approached the

operating table, our hiding place. If we were found, she would definitely kill us.

At this time, Rika and I stopped scowling angrily at each other, holding our breaths and waiting.

Akiko's feet were before my eyes, stopping in front of me.

(I'm d-done for...)

Yet I noticed something even more worse unleashing—it was Rika's trembling cheeks. Humans were such strange creatures. Sometimes we would have an urge to smile or laugh in situations we shouldn't. Rika seemed to have entered in such state. If she were to laugh now, we would definitely be discovered. By then, we would probably get scolded harshly. And perhaps the long bench lock would revive.

If that was the case, then there was no other way—I stretched my hand to cover Rika's mouth. Feeling my hand, Rika moved around restlessly. Even though I had pressed on it hardly, some weak sounds still leaked out. I felt a cold streak along my spine.

Did she hear us?

Fortunately, it didn't. Akiko made cracking footstep sounds again and moved away. The sounds diminished gradually and following were the sounds of the door opening and closing.

"W-We're safe."

Confirming Akiko had left, I let out a breath I had been holding onto for a long time. Then I moved my hand away from Rika's mouth. Rika's laughing sounds, at the same instant, shot through the whole operating room.

"Yuuichi, it's funny! Your face just now was twitching! Ahahaha. It's funny!"

"What a reason for you to laugh!"

"But it's really twitching!"

"Whom do you think that caused this?"

My angry scowls sounded quite serious. Yet upon looking at Rika's glittering smile, I had cast my fury a thousand miles away. Rika who would let out laughs like this were indeed hundreds of thousands of times more adorable than when when she was angry.

My heart seemed to have been affected by Rika's smile, becoming brighter than ever. When I had noticed it, my eyes were squinted because of my smile.

"Hahaha. It's amusing."

Rika was still overflowing with joy; I, on the other hand, was grouchy.

"Not a bit."

But that's just my little complaint. It had actually been quite fun , for I got to see Rika's smile. This merely made my day.

"Still, we're lucky for not being discovered."

"Yeah," I nodded.

"If we're discovered, we'd definitely get killed."

We were now climbing the stairs heading to the rooftop. For some unapparent reason, Rika said she wanted to have a stroll there.

The iron door of the rooftop was heavy and rusted. Rika, feeble and small, seemed to find it difficult to push open the door. I stretched my hand behind her to help. Beside my arm, Rika smiled in a bit of embarrassment.

(Indeed, she's completely different when she smiles....)

Upon coming out to the outdoors, Rika and I were surrounded by the cold wind. The towels and sheets that had been recently washed were being dried on the rooftop. Infused by wind, they looked round and stuffed, dancing around in the air. The scene looked exactly as if the people who had passed away in the hospital were showing themselves as ghosts and spirits. There could be hundreds of thousands or even more lives gone in this hospital. Uncountable lives far more than the number of sheets here. Also, there would still be more lives, endlessly, gone. What we call hospital was such a place. And we were now residing here.

Everything around me seemed to be taken granted too easily, so these thoughts hadn't occurred to me before. After all, my sickness wouldn't possibly take my life away. But things were different now: Rika and I seemed to be escaping something as we evaded those purely white towels and sheets and walked towards the armrest.

The whole village could be seen. It felt as if the village looked even more vivid and explicit than what it looked in the wards. The green colour of the Turret Mountain and the Ise shrine made them afloat in the grey village. The winter sky, though placid, dimmed and weakened the clear, white light descending from above. This

might be a reason why the village seemed desolate, as if every resident had left their houses and gone aloft. Perhaps there were only Rika and I who were left here, having such boring delusions harbouring our minds.

"Hey. Why didn't you ask me?" Rika asked, standing still.

I didn't know what she meant, so I asked her conversely, "Ask? What should I ask you?"

The strong winter wind howled. Rika's fine, long hair swayed along the wind, striking me still as I gazed blankly at its dance.

"Things about me."

"What about you?"

"My body condition."

My heart suddenly throbbed. It really skipped a beat.

"You should know about it; at the least, you know it's not too good."

"Mmm. Yes."

"I know you have been wary of this simply from your attitude, but why didn't you ever ask me? I hate such feelings of uncertainty."

She stopped speaking for a while; she must have been waiting, waiting for me to speak. Knowing of this, I asked, “Is it really that bad?”

My feet immediately started to shake. This feeling was like dreaming of falling from some high height in the midnight and waking up subsequently in a flurry and in panic.

“I might die.”

As she spoke these words, she, for some unapparent reason, wore a smile.

“It seems to be set.”

At that instant, my view distorted rapidly. It was exactly like the formation of a crystal into a high-performance fish view. Everything seemed explicitly clear, even details were there: the serious decay of the armrest or the scattered white paint gave a prickly sensation to my fingers. Rika’s hands on the armrest looked really small, so small they looked to be devoid of the ability to grasp her destiny or luck. Her fingernails were cut short; girls of her age would want to leave their fingers long, or perhaps apply them with nail polish. Yet patients were prohibited to do this, for if they do, when emergency situations occur, say they move around frantically in pain, their fingernails might scratch the doctors or the nurses.

On her body were other similar dismal situations. Her hair was long and non-dyed, all because she couldn’t go to the salon during

her long stay in the hospital. The hair illustrated her seemingly endless days in the hospital. In fact since the first time I saw her I had noticed she had been staying in hospital for a long period. She hadn't bought any clothes during these several years. From day till night, day after day, she was always wearing her pajamas. Clothes other than that were prohibited. The most she could do was to select the patterns of the pajamas. Certainly, putting up makeup was also prohibited. Mascara, eye shadow, rouge, lipstick...all of these possessions of girls of her age were probably all so non-existent in Rika.

From now on, even more things would be deprived from her.

"W-What sickness do you have?"

Though mine, the sound seemed far away. My whole person was dizzy, having the feeling of insufficient blood flowing to my head.

"Heart. Do you know what valves are? When the heart pumps blood like a pump, valves prevent the backflow of blood. If the valves malfunction, the only thing possible, I heard, is to transplant the organ, but my tissues are weak, so the chance of failure is high," said Rika, her voice without any articulation; the tone was like the dinner I had yesterday: it was quite delicious, but a bit too spicy. It would be better if some aromatic herbs were placed...

Rika continued with the same tone, "This is hereditary. My father had the same sickness and had been living in hospital. My father resolutely decided to do the transplant operation when I

was eight. The first time it failed. The doctor did his best to save him and managed to do another operation. Yet my father wasn't saved in the end. His heart stopped during the operation. Because of this past experience, doctors were afraid of doing the operation for me."

"B-But the operation your father had was ten years from now. Operations nowadays should be a lot safer."

"Yes. The chance of success is a lot higher now."

Rika's head moved a bit. It looked she was nodded her head vertically, but it looked as if she was waving her head too.

"But it's all a gamble with a low winning possibility."

As soon as I heard the word gamble, the scene of my father ripping a parimutuel ticket would surface itself in my heart.

When I thought about it, my father had always been a loser in gambling. Gamble was this sort of a thing. The chance of winning was remarkably low. Yet you only lose money in parimutuel gambling. You only have to tear the ticket, throw it, and put your mind in winning the next gamble. But should Rika lose in this gamble haunted with such low-winning chance, what she would lose was her life.

She wouldn't have the next chance. Not any.

"Should I take the operation, I would have to prepare myself mentally like my father."

"Like your father...you mean...?"

"My father took me to the mountain before the operation. He said when he was young and healthy, he would often go there to play. Actually, in his current state back then, he couldn't climb mountains. He took me there using the last bit of strength he could offer. That was when I knew my father had already prepared himself mentally. After that, I had forgotten where the mountain was. After all, I was too small, and my father hadn't told the true name of the mountain to me. My father only called it the Turret Mountain."

"What. Isn't it..."

Rika nodded.

"It's you who told me, Yuuichi!" That mountain is the Turret Mountain."

I followed Rika's eyes intently: the Turret Mountain was there. It was the place Rika and his father went, the place of their last memories after his father had prepared himself mentally. I remembered how Rika looked like in her ward, falling in silence, staring endlessly beyond the windows.

(I understand now...)

Rika was staring at that mountain, staring at the memories embedded within. She had always thought of her father who had died from their common illness. Also, perhaps she was also thinking of her short life.

"I, I want to go there again and have a look."

After a long while, Rika murmured, "If I do that, can I prepare myself mentally too?"

When the lights were off, I sneaked out of the hospital. My body felt heavy and weary. Actually, if I don't sleep well and let my body rest, the results of my body check will be poor, meaning that my condition is aggravating, indicating a really bad situation. In the worst-case scenario, the date that I leave the hospital will be postponed. It was a headache. Why had I made myself in such a situation? Was it because I had made it a habit? Or was there something stuck in my heart?

My body feeling weary was an obvious sign of my condition worsening. Still, I left the hospital and kept walking on the streets in the winter night.

The whole village was desolate and silent, without a sign of human. Every store on the street had closed their steel bars; the cool, icy breeze swept through the lower part of the triforium; the incessantly blinking red signal dyed the asphalt road with red and black intermittently.

I looked upwards, seeing a half moon hanging high on the sky. Even the Sirius was unusually dim around the moonlight.

"Oh, what's up?"

After I knocked the windows, Tsusaka opened the windows for me.

"You came here yesterday already. Is it all right to come out every day? Won't you get scolded?"

I grinned, "No, it isn't. I'll get scolded."

"How's your body?"

"Not to good either."

Grinning, I climbed through the windows.

"Meh. What a headache."

"What's aching your head?"

"Haven't I told you? I was on charge to take care of some wrecked girl."

On the day we went to karaoke, I told him a lot about Rika: how I couldn't stand these days, and how any girl would be so unruly as her...I blabbered everything to him to vent my depression, and he sympathised with me.

"I'm talking about that girl."

Having loosened myself up, I started my long talk again.

I sat on the floor, turned on the video game console, and started playing shooting games. “Yiuu, yiuuu. The sound effects wheezed in the room loudly. The fighter aircraft repeatedly swung in circles in high speed, taking down the enemy aircrafts in front of it. < Good job> <Let’s go!> <You are the best!>...Once the enemy aircraft billows fire and dust, the co-pilot would make these sounds. I was preoccupied in attacking the emerging enemy aircrafts.

Cling!

The sound effects blasted.

Rinnngg!

The co-pilot sounded a bit noisily.

“Isn’t that girl called Rika?”

“Yeah. I heard she would soon die.”

“Ah...”

“It seems to be some problem with the growth of her heart valves. These tissues were as weak as sponges. I heard the operation might not cure her, and that her father had died from the same illness.”

There was an enemy aircraft behind me. I repeated swinging in high speed to get out with the enemy aircraft’s focus area, but however I tried, I couldn’t. Its missile flew at me, and a booming

sound was heard. The lower right corner of the aircraft pictures gradually became red. <The right wing is blasted...the left wing is blasted...the power of the engine is low...>

<Goddam!>

The co-pilot let out a dismal cry.

"Truth be told, I'm really fed up with her."

"Did you ask her in person?"

"She told me herself, saying that she hate my attitude of not wanting to make things clear. She is this kind of a girl. How should I put it? She doesn't leave things undealt with. That's why she's so harsh and adamant."

The aircraft became harder to control, and because of this, my aircraft was often attacked by enemy aircrafts. The picture of the aircraft on the lower right corner was dyed with a complete crimson, bloody colour. I hadn't heard the dismal cries of co-pilot; he should have died during the jet escape. Sorry, my comrade.

The screen a complete black afterwards...

White text appeared in the black background: <You have been taken down. Do you want to challenge again?> I pressed several times the button "Yes".

"Sigh. In fact I can understand some of her feelings. Having been residing in the hospital for such a long time, anyone would become irascible and impatient. Weren't I prohibited to meet

visitors in my first month of the hospital stay? That was enough to drive me nuts. Rika's stay could be much longer, say, several years .”

Rika's unruliness was inevitable in this situation.

We humans were such creatures. When placed in a painful situation, we would become irascible and impatient, unable to cast these feelings away with a smile. This was inevitable. Besides, Rika and I were still seventeen, children. There was no way we could control our emotions. I remembered Rika's voice: “You're so noisy! Scram!” Once I anger her, even only a bit, she would immediately shout out her dissatisfactory, but when I really decided to turn away, she would say angrily, “What? Don't you know how to apologise?”

Whenever such situations found me, I was helpless, fawning, and apologising like an idiot, forcing my all to uplift her mood. Now that I knew everything, I only considered Rika's noisy sounds too sorrowful.

<”You idiot! Don't come back!”>

Perhaps, someday, I wouldn't even hear her angry scowls. She was already far away from me, and perhaps she would travel to a place even farther away someday. While I thought of these, I controlled the aircraft crudely, continuing the battle. And because of this I ended up failing the mission. When I had managed to get to the third stage, the dark night was already gradually replaced with brilliant, bright light.

Tsukasa had been staying up with me for so long, and he had to go to school today.

"I'm returning," I declared selfishly and stood up subsequently.

"U-Um..."

Tsukasa spoke when I was crawling through the window.

"What?"

"I think it's a wonder why you, even knowing that Rika is so unruly, are willing to keep her company."

"..."

"Also..."

"Oh, the sky's bright already!" I interrupted Tsukasa's words. Then, slipping my feet into the shoes placed beside the windows, I walked away.

"Tsukasa. I'm sorry for bothering you."

"Mmm. Yeah."

"Thanks."

The half moon as well as the Sirius was gone.

The dawning sky was dyed with a bright silver colour, so it felt particularly far. Even if I stood still and stretched both of my hands, I couldn't reach that sky. My fingers were destined only to linger in the empty mid-air. Only the east horizon was glowing with a dazzling gold shimmer, for the sun was about to land on it.

Another day began, or perhaps yesterday ended.

No matter how many lives were gone in a day, how many people were hurt because of this, how many other people were hurt because of these people, or whether some naughty kid brought trouble to others, our lives would begin or end like usual. It was the same, endless reputation wherever the place. And it was because of this that our usual lives would be called usual. Be it the cars parked on the road, the asphalt road on the ground, or the white smoke I was puffing—everything was hosting equally the familiar usualness.

Even death was a part of this. No one could escape from it.

I staggered forward. My body felt even tired than when I left hospital. It wasn't only a result of staying up. This tiredness illustrated the rotting of my inner organs, the distinct symptoms of intestines unwell.

The results of my body check would definitely be poor.

The hospital was buzzing in the morning. It was fortunate for me, for I wouldn't garner much attention in this noise. I walked through the gates confidently, having the pose "I'm only out to buy juice," or "I'm back after a short while", and walked into my ward.

I worked hard to return to my ward without having anyone notice me, but I stopped walking, for the door of Tada's ward, adjacent to mine, was open. To prevent the door from closing, there was a doorstop in front of the foot of the door. The bed inside was empty. I didn't mean no one was sleeping on it, but the mattress was turned entirely upside down. The naked bed showed only the white bed frame like the bone structure of some large animal.

The empty bed led to only two explanations...

Had he left from hospital? Or did he...

"Hi, juvenile delinquent."

It was Akiko.

"You sneaked out of hospital yesterday, didn't you?"

Akiko looked deprived of sleep. I didn't know whether it really was lack of sleep or some other reason. Her face looked madly appalling.

I asked in a flurry, "How's Tada?"

"His illness worsened suddenly last night," said Akiko, stretching her body, "he passed away at three this morning."

Passed away...

That old pervert passed away...

"Three this morning..."

"Yeah, that's why I found out you have sneaked out. You should stop already, as it's tiring for me to help you to cover this up. I was almost caught by the head nurse. Do you understand, you juvenile delinquent?"

"Yes..."

I nodded and walked back to my ward. My mind felt completely numb, and my eyes couldn't focus on the things in my vision.

My consciousness still stayed on the bed...

After some effort, I remembered the amber sugar balls Tada had gave me. I had thrown them away, for they were too hard to swallow. There were even clinging sounds when I threw them away. I ran beside the trashcan to try to find them. Read

magazines, orange peels, crumpled tissue balls, coffee cans, leftover bread crumbs, an empty chocolate box...I pushed these stuff aside and dived my fingers into the depths of the trashcan. Nothing. My fingers could only touch a dirty bottom but definitely not anything of the brilliance of the ambers. It was reasonable, though. It had been a several days since I had threw them away. They must have been brought away as trash long ago.

Knock, knock, knock...

Knocking sounds came from the door.

"Can I bother you for a moment?"

Akiko opened the door and came in, holding a seemingly heavy and large paper box.

"What's up, Akiko?"

"This is what Tada told me to take care of. What an old pervert, giving others trouble at his last moments. I can't take him."

As Akiko spoke, she threw the paper box beside my bed, making a thud. Then, she spilled everything out from the box, followed with clapping and flipping sounds. Before my eyes were magazines stacked like a mountain; all of the magazines, of course, have females as their protagonists.

'The Temptation of the University Female Student in the Classroom'

'The Night of the Burning Love Affair'

'Hot Girl Wearing Glasses'

'Free Lades & Big Babies'

'The Female Hot Spring - I'm being cooked to such a hot state'

'Ahah. The Breast in My Memory'

'The Moe short Sports Pants'

Almost everything with every title was there. There were succinct, great titles and cliche titles as well. Some of them, being cliche, could in fact bring a distinctive taste. The contents should be mostly similar. Humans take different forms of existence. Was this what people meant by "The Lord is ubiquitous?" No, this didn't seem quite right. My blank mind, having used up over the night, was thinking of this stuff.

This was Tada's collection.

Akiko went to and fro Tada's ward and mine to move these pornographic magazines. The number of them was stunning; it was not just a hundred but tens of times larger than that. After thirty minutes, there stood a mountain in my ward made of pornographic books and magazines: it really was a mountain. And fabulous it was. Remarkable it was.

"This is what Tada told me to take care of," Akiko said, gasping, "He told me to give these blue magazines to you."

"To me?"

"Right. There were his last words. Isn't this too much? That old fart once came back to his senses before he left, and I asked him what he wanted to say. He told me to give you these blue magazines. From what I see, he should know he's about to die, but he didn't mention anything else but this. Men are really idiots, helpless idiots. Anyway, that's about it. You should take them with gratitude."

When Akiko left my ward, she gave the pornographic mountain a sturdy kick.

On the following day, my body was checked. The results were poor: every number had rocketed to the red warning area. The doctor-in-charge was shocked and stumped, and Akiko enraged; thus, the long bench lock revived.

Chapter 3 : The Road to the Turret Mountain

第三話 砲台山へ至る道

1

The night...

After the lights were turned off, the ward was embraced with pitch-blackness; only a bit of light struggled its way through the windows uncovered by the curtains. Under the white weak light, everything looked cloaked with damp radiance. The patterns resembling ghosts and monsters on the ceiling, the hot kettle and the cup on the table, the oxygen supplier written with the big word OXYGEN, the edge of the bed with its paint falling off—everything felt unreal, as if I had entered a fantasy world.

I couldn't sleep any bit. This was reasonable, as I had recently become a complete nocturnal creature. Impossible was it for me to sleep at this time. Sitting up, I stared blankly at the mountain of pornographic books, Tada's inheritance, beside my bed. We have a saying: "A tiger leaves its skin behind when it dies." What the old pervert left was these, and to me also. I had wondered why it was I , but I couldn't come to a conclusion because, perhaps, his ward was adjacent to mine, or I was still seventeen-year-old.

I took one and had a look, though what I believed it to have was crap and just some nude girls. When I flipped through the pages, my expectation was right. The whole book was full of nude pictures—from the first page to the last page. Tada should be eighty by now, yet he still collected a lot of this stuff. I let out a laugh of dismay. Tada, you're such an idiot! I laughed, thinking, he was such a laughable idiot.

It was at this time that an inexplicable power befell me. That power was stimulating some corner in my heart—no, it was stimulating some corner of me as a human, and exciting more power there. It was turbulence, a turbid flow, as well as a torrent. Its strength could flush everything away. First, I was puzzled; then , I understood. It was perhaps the power Tada had sent into my body, or perhaps a power that had long been dormant in some part of my body, which Tada had awakened. I had long been escaping this power and its usage. A more fitting example would be a deliberate aversion of my attention. But since the power had suddenly risen in my body and shouting continuously at me, " Wake up. Wake up now! Man does not know when he will die! If you hesitate, everything might come to naught! Wake up, you idiot. Can you hear me? Till when will you stop escaping?"

I balled my fists on my right hand, yet inexplicably my whole body was pumped with power, without a slight sense of tiredness.

"Good," I murmured, taking my phone to the balcony.

Although it was prohibited to phone in the hospital, the rules were less strict when I was at the balcony.

Rika hadn't yet fallen asleep.

"What's the matter..."

She looked at me, completely surprised.

It was embarrassing to sneak into a girl's ward usually, but now I was forced by some formless power, so I took it easily and calmly . The power descending from above lightly moved my arms and legs exactly like manipulating a doll.

"Let's sneak out of the hospital!"

"What?"

"Didn't you say you could prepare yourself mentally if you go to the Turret mountain? If this is the case, then it's simple! Let's head to the Turret mountain."

"Now?"

"We can only sneak out in the night! We have to do it now."

In the dimness, Rika looked very petite, as if she was about to melt into the dim background behind her. She was about to vanish , yet she was still here where I could touch.

"We have a scooter anyway. You only have to be the passenger. "

"..."

"Let's go, Rika!"

"..."

"Didn't your father the one who took you there ten years ago? This time, it's me."

Rika stared at me flatly. Belied in those eyes was a strong power . Every time she eyed me like this, I would immediately avert my eyes. But now, I could take on this mysterious power with ease.

"I'll go," said Rika, at last.

Embedded in her eyes was some kind of radiance.

"Take me there!"

"Who is this person?" asked Rika, vigilantly pointed at Tsukasa in fear.

Tsukasa lowered his head politely, "H-Hello."

I called Tsukasa here, for I need a helping hand. He was a real friend, as he had run in the middle of night to the hospital without any of my explanation on the situation. On a side note, Tsukasa was wearing a tiger mask widely known in Japanese wrestling. He said his older female cousin worked as a nurse in this hospital, so

he wouldn't want to reveal his identity. Nevertheless, I reckon that even when he could cover his face, he couldn't cover his extravagant body.

"This guy is my friend—tiger-masked man. He's a messenger of justice."

Rika still looked upwards at Tsukasa with suspicion.

"Okay, let's hurry," I declared, as there was no point trying to get around with these trivial matters.

With me at the front, Rika following behind me, and Tsukasa at the back, we advanced long the corridor. Although we had intentionally avoided the nurses' patrols, we still had to be vigilant . The most difficult stage was the appalling ten metres. There were no special night entrances in the east hospital wing, so we could only, as usual, use the entrance in the west hospital wing. We had to pass through the special, long slope made for wheelchairs in order to get anywhere. We were now walking along this difficult, long path. The medical station facing opposite to the slope had its bright lights turned on. Luck was the thing we had to rely on. We had to look out for the nurses in the medical station, as they could be looking at us any moment.

We had the special luck. I told myself as I advanced. After all, Tsukasa had gone through here just then.

"Listen carefully. Keep your body low, and walking on our knees. Don't turn back," I said softly.

The tiger-masked man and Rika nodded in unison.

"Okay, let's go."

Having seen them nodding, I dashed frontwards in a gulp, but I couldn't be too quick, as I was bringing Rika along with me. The appalling ten metres felt much longer than usual.

A chill crept over my back. It had to be some premonition.

"What do you think you're doing!"

When we were halfway there, we heard Akiko's voice.

"Hey. Stand right there."

Rats! We're found!

In a scurry, I shouted, "Run!"

We dispelled our way of walking on our knees and started to run normally. Rika was the only one I had in thought. When I turned my head, I saw her dashing with the greatest speed she could pull off. I didn't know whether it was fine for her to do that, but Tsukasa, on the other hand, was certainly fine. Behind Tsukasa was Akiko, looking at us in fury, running towards us imposingly. And a cracking sound came from a distance not afar.

"Yuuichi! Stop now!"

I-It was horrifying—too horrifying.

Akiko jumped from a high position on the slope, and at that instant, everything seemed to be played in slow motion. Akiko, descending from above, stopped Tsukasa. Although Akiko tried to evade him, Tsukasa's large arms extended and ceased Akiko's pursuit. Flashed in Akiko's eyes were dangerous rays. Before everyone knew it, a wheezing sound shot through the air, and Akiko had shot a blow on Tsukasa's thigh with a loud, painful Thai kick.

Cringing, Tsukasa knelt down in pain.

"Ah. Tiger-masked man!" Rika cried.

I pulled Rika's hands forcibly.

"Rika, let's go now."

"But, tiger-masked man, he...!"

"Don't worry. He's the messenger of justice!"

"B-But..."

At that moment, Tsukasa, kneeling on one of his knees, showed a sign of cheering for us with his left hand; His right hand forced a big thumb, exactly like an authentic wrestler. Then, with that pose, Tsukasa grinned.

His words had directly been sent into my heart...directly sent into my heart.

They would definitely be sent to Rika's heart as well.

"Let's hurry!"

"Y-Yeah!"

We ran for our lives with increasing speed. Crying and moaning sounds were heard from our backs.

"Hey! Stop gripping on my feet!"

"N-No. I don't...but...I'm sorry!"

"I'm telling you to let go! Let go now!"

The sounds sharpened instantly.

"Didn't I tell you to let go?"

Bam. Boosh! The sounds of bodies colliding were heard.

Guahh! Tsukasa moaned.

"Woah. Let go already!"

"Sorry. Sorry!"

Kuah. Kuah.

"You're so persistent! Can't you hear me? What's wrong with your hand?"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry!"

Splat! Guaghh!

Without turning my head, I didn't know the details of what happened, but they should be having quite a fight. Every time Rika and I heard depressed sounds and Tsukasa's moaning sounds , we would grasp one another's hands tighter. Some kind of power was filling the inside of me. Rika was definitely experiencing the same feeling.

Stood in front of the night entrance was a scooter. On top of it were two safety helmets. As I got onto the scooter, I was impressed by Tsukasa's meticulous preparation. In fact, the scooter was his brother's, and he took the risk by bringing it here without his brother's permission.

Having sat on the front seat, I did my best to squeeze more backseat space. Pointing to my back, I said, "Get on now," and put on a safety helmet. Then, I started the engine.

"Hold on!"

The engine vibrated and howled, sounding like the thumping of a heart.

"Is this all right?"

Rika's thin hands embraced my waist. Her fingers were tightly clasped somewhere around my bellybutton. She couldn't have been applied with perfume yet she smelled wonderful. As my neck felt the Rika's warm breath, my brain as well as my body was numbed from infatuation. My heart thumped. I couldn't help swallowing. Deeply I wanted to just turn my head around and embrace Rika and to bury my face in her glamorous hair and her soft neck. Of course, let alone that sort of crazy feat. Even if I could pull it out, Rika would kick the hell out of me if I did that. While I was holding onto the scooter's handle, I remembered Tada and had a thought: *Real girls are great. Yeah, they really are. The ones in pornographic magazines are nowhere competent.*

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

Giving the throttle a push, the scooter vibrantly shook the night air resoundingly. The two small tyres glided along the asphalt road, advancing on their way. As such, we began our journey.

Perhaps, the permanence of our journey was marked with an ending point.

2

The wind was chilly. The safety helmet I was wearing was not the ones that would cover my whole head but only the ones that crowned my head. Two green lines ran over the helmet, with the imprinted words, "Shimada". Anyway, the blowing, chilly wind soon froze my face. Still, I didn't care a bit. Rika's hands were still

clasped around my bellybutton, and the touch of he arms felt certain. I could feel Rika behind me as well as her warmth. Therefore, I didn't care a bit.

In the night, the village was deadly silent. The only sound was the engine of our scooter. The various objects in the scene fleeted one after another in seconds. Under the dim background of the night, the red signal lamp ticked and flashed, standing in an eerie posture beside the electric pole on the road as well as the numerous electric wires piercing the air. Steel gates closed, the shops in the shopping street gave no hint of a living soul. The supermarket closed down for several years had windows with countless broken glasses scattered in the supermarket's parking lot , reflecting the blue and white moonlight.

That place was once a photo studio before it became a supermarket. It had already been ten years since then. When I was still in primary school, my father often asked me to buy photographic plates. My father's hobby was photography back then. Only when he was playing with his camera did my stupid old father look like a serious person. When in a good mood, he would even allow me to touch his camera.

"Listen carefully: don't break it."

He would remind me softly, placing the camera in my small hands. In my nervous hands, the Nikon felt heavy. Even till now I could still remember that touch.

Once we had passed the station, I called, "We'll be at the foot of the mountain in around ten minutes!"

...but the words coming out of my mouth sounded like...

“Wheels be at the footage duh fountain in a round stem knees!”

My lips were frozen, unable to speak properly.

“What are you saying?” Rika asked loudly.

Wearing the safety helmet that covered her whole head, Rika seemed to have maintained her lips unfrozen.

“We’re almond dare!”

‘We’re almost there’ was what I wanted to say. I had no idea whether she could understand what I had said, though, but she seemed she could, as she nodded.

I gave the throttle a stronger kick. Speeding wasn’t an issue now since I didn’t have a driving license to begin with. Besides, the two of us were sitting in this scooter.[4] Right, we were done for should we be caught, for we were violating any rule outlined. So I decided to travel at full speed to the Turret Mountain, as it seemed the best strategy.

I drove into the curved road gingerly as I paid attention not to swing Rika out of the scooter. I had to decelerate, but my hands, ungloved, were frozen and numb, and my reaction at the moment was slower by half a second. The speed felt a bit too fast, and a cold streak of nervousness streamed from the depths of my heart. Rats. I couldn’t turn back. Rika sensed it as well. She clasped her hands tightly around my waist. Nevertheless, we managed to pass

the curved road. The back tyre slipped and made an annoying wheezing sound.

The fear that crept onto my heart after the episode pushed a breath of relief into me.

Rika cried loudly, “You have to be careful!”

“I know!”

But, truth be told, I didn’t.

When we finally reached the foot of the Turret Mountain, the facts proved that I really didn’t. The Turret Mountain, formally called the Dragon Head Mountain, was a small mountain of around a hundred metres high. There was a path leading to the peak, which was quite an easy, soothing path. Yet the path wasn’t paved. Our scooter could go up, but we had to keep our speed minimal. As a local, I was certain of this. Therefore, once a road with scattered pebbles appear in front of us, I would tell myself, “ Okay. We’re there. It’s about time we decelerated.” The only problem, however, was that my numb hands couldn’t turn my thoughts into action immediately.

It’s bad. The scattered pebbles were getting closer. I managed to move my hands, but I couldn’t employ any force. Helpless, I gripped onto the handle and forcibly grounded the car to a halt in slowing speed. As a result, before the speed had dropped to the expected level, our scooter had rushed into the pebbled road. And at that moment, the front tyre knocked into a fist-sized rock.

We were bound to display a fascinating front-wheel-soaring stunt!

In the blink of an eye, everything was turned upside-down: the sky and the ground; the darkness of the night and the light of the moon. When I had returned to my senses, my body was thrown into mid-air. That instant was unbelievably long. Well, how did this happen? I believe we had crashed. Rika would be fine, I guess. No, I had to catch her in the air as soon as possible. I had to protect her. There were about three other things I thought of before I landed. Of course, I failed to catch Rika in the air.

As my back was hit heavily, there was some time I could hardly breath, only able to roll and moan loudly in pain.

When I had managed to stand up, immediately I began to search for Rika, only to see her kneeling down five metres away from me.

"Rika!"

I ran to Rika impatiently.

Seeing my face, Rika cried in a voice about to tear up, "You idiot! I thought we would be dead!"

"So-Sorry! Are you hurt? Are you fine?"

"I don't know."

Taking off her safety helmet, Rika stood up slowly. She twisted and moved her body parts to check her body condition. Although

her face was twisted together in pain, her other body parts seem to still be able to function.

"It looks fine, but that place feels painful."

"What a relief."

I let out a sigh, but subsequently my heart jumped frantically—The left knee part of Rika's pajamas was long dyed in bloody red.

"Rika. Your knees!"

"Eh?"

Rika only noticed her wound after being reminded. After curling up the lower part of her pajamas, Rika had her thin legs exposed. There was a large cut on her kneecap, though not to the extreme of cracking, still, it appeared like a serious cut on muscle layer made from a collision. Blood copiously flowed from the cut; its dazzling red colour fazed me.

Drip. Red, fresh blood slid along her white skin and dripped.

"Y-Your blood is flowing out..."

What the heck had I done? Rats. Sucker. I really was a super, helpless idiot.

"It's fine," Rika, however, said.

She took out a handkerchief from the pocket in her jacket to wrap her kneecap. Certainly, despite this, blood kept on flowing affluently.

Still, Rika stood up.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“But...”

“It isn’t that painful.”

Liar.

“Yuuichi. It’s you who told me that you would bring me there.”

“...”

“Are those words lies?”

Embedded in Rika eyes were radiance. Perhaps it was the same stuff as the miraculous, growing power in my body.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Nodding, I slowly walked to the scooter. It was lying there, its two wheels spinning and cracking in thin air. Maybe the scooter was broken. I placed my hands on the handle, praying deep down from my heart: Please. You have to move.

If it was broken, our journey would end here. In normal situations, it was already impossible to let Rika, who had a feeble body, to climb to the peak. Now that Rika's leg was hurt, all we could do was to give up, stop short, and even ask Akiko for help, should the scooter fail to operate. When this thought sprung to my mind, something in my abdomen twitched to a ball.

Move! I prayed, while turning the throttle.

Kugugugugugu!

Followed by sharp sounds, the back wheel spun in the air vigorously. It was fine and didn't break. We could continue our journey!

Bearing the pain from the bruise in my arm, I lifted the scooter. Then, Rika and I bestrode on it.

"Don't crash this time."

"I understand."

Prudently pushing the throttle, I drove forward slowly. There were skid marks left by passing cars, and obstacles like pebbles were much less. I chose to follow the skid mark left, but a pebbled road was still a pebbled road. Once the scooter ran over a larger pebble, the scooter would sway in unstableness. And at these times, Rika's arms around my waist would hold me harder. At first, I thought she did this from fear. But later when I heard her moaning sounds, I knew the reason was different.

She did this from the pain induced in the cut of her leg. Rika's cut was perhaps more serious than I had imagined. Let's just head back. This thought just came to me naturally. Nevertheless, I immediately casted it away. I couldn't just call things off at the middle here. I had to think of ways to get to the peak; otherwise, it felt as if our future would collapse in the same way.

The half moon hung in the sky, emitting a dazzling and glittering brilliance. Nearby was the Sirius. Every time we went through a curve in the path, the half moon would appear at the right and then at the left, or the front and then the back. Anyhow, the moon always kept our company.

The road was embraced in a body of dark green. It was complete darkness. It felt as if the road we were passing through was the only zone belonging to humans. In this long and endless time, we remained silent, concentrated in staring frontwards. Before our eyes wasn't a typical mountain road but our future. It was the rightful future we put our utmost to approach, to pursue, and to finally grasp.

A while later, I remembered Tada.

3

It happened a great long time ago. I still remember it was the time when I was still prohibited to meet guests. Back then, I wasn't adapted to living in the hospital and wasn't capable of sneaking out of the hospital. Anyway, I was bored to death. Staying in the ward of prolonged periods of time had nearly suffocated me, putting me in distress. It felt exactly like living behind the bars in a

jail. As such, I wanted to breathe some fresh air outside and often ran to the rooftop. On one day, when I went to the rooftop as usual , someone was already there—Tada. He sat beside the water tank, facing the sun. He looked like a large tortoise bathing in the sun. Upon seeing me, he would grin and smile, much like a large tortoise.

"Son," he would call me, "do you have a girlfriend?"

He kicked off our conversation with such a question. I bet everything in his mind was just girls.

I was stumped by the question.

"N-No..."

...or should I say...

"I didn't have the opportunity..."

I remembered myself murmuring such words. Back then, I didn 't really have a chance to chat with my grandfather, so I was completely ignorant on how to get along such creatures called old people.

A that time, Tada must have been laughing silently in his heart.

"Argh! How can that be? Isn't this too lonely?"

"Hahaha. Yes."

"How about Akiko?"

"What?"

Hearing his shocking words, I couldn't help making a sound.

At those times, I had already known deeply of Akiko's scariness . The day before that, I was dripped by her three times in a row. Not to mention, when I was playing on the wheelchair, she threw me as well as the wheelchair upside-down, seriously injuring my waist. Sometimes, when I was curious and stretched my hand into a morgue to peek, she would sandwich my head with the door and bully me. That woman knew no limits to her torture.

"No thanks," I rejected melancholically, remembering the pain in my wrist, waist, and head.

Seeing me like this, Tada smiled.

"She's more than the looks. She has her adorable aspects."

"A-Adorable?"

"Yes, very adorable."

What was this old guy spewing? Or was it that the word ' adorable' meant differently in Tada's old place? Perhaps the people there would say 'adorable' when they meant detestable' or 'abominable'.

"Akiko's really a nice lady."

"Oh..."

"My first love was a girl like Akiko. It dated back to the times wen Japanese A6Ms were chasing America's B29 bombers. Right. It was around Showa 17 to Showa 18.[5]"

It surprised me to hear Tada talking about stories all of a sudden, but after listening further, I found the story quite good. Tada's first love (who was said to resemble Akiko) was the daughter of the leader of a distinguished village—old Ms. Tome. No, back then, Tada wasn't yet an old tortoise but an real, living teenager—Kura. Therefore, Ms. Tome had to be a pretty lady at those times. Anyway, Tada and Ms. Tome fell in love with each other. Allegedly it was an intense and feverish love. Because of the disparity of their social status, this type of love was rare in the society. The two of them had to find meeting opportunities by sneaking into shrines or toilets, comforting their souls through these discrete moments. When departing, they would, reluctant to leave, have their watery eyes soaked in tears. It was also alleged that Tada was filled with passion and eagerness to safeguard the love he and Ms. Tome shared. By the way, there was a time and age of A6Ms, bamboo rifle, the daughter of the leader of a distinguished village, Tome, and Kura. It was an exploding age. It was inexplicable to hear that these things happened only fifty to sixty years ago. Or should I say I was stumped. Things like the leader of a distinguished village were extinct in this day and age.

"But..." said Tada, his face now drawn with wrinkles, "our disparity in social status was too huge after all."

On one day, Ms. Tome was married to a navy captain. The marriage was completely arranged by her parents, paying no

single heed to the daughter's will. An even shocking thing was that, on the day following their marriage, the captain went to the front lines. Allegedly he came back safely, but the whole thing was odd and messed up. If he had been dead, what should Ms. Tome, crying in tears dismally when being married, do? Wouldn't she immediately become a widow?

"This departure was the worst I had to withstand in my entire life!"

Moved, I nodded in awe at Tada's words.

"Yes. It sounds really desperate."

The story was quite touching, pushing me to the verge of my crying. Right. At that time, I still hadn't understood that Tada was a super, extravagant liar. In retrospect, whether there was someone called Ms. Tome remained a mystery. Even if there was such a person, I wouldn't think they had the relationship Tada talked about. Wouldn't fishermen claim their lost fish bigger than what they actually were? At least this was what I reckoned, for Tada said this afterwards: "Son, if you meet a lady you favour someday, don't hesitate and charge right up. Also, don't give up. Men have to be determined. If you give up, you'll just lament for the rest of your life."

Maybe, Tada hadn't told Ms. Tome what he really wanted at that time. Probably he gave in for the disparity of their social status . Then, he lamented...lamented even to his eighties. Of course, this was only my personal imagination.

"Listen. You have to stand strong till the end. Only with this in mind can you get through any predicament in your way. If you give up and do nothing, then you're the biggest idiot ever."

Wasn't the idiot he was talking himself? On a side note, why do adults around me like to say these lines? At that moment, my father's lines rang in my mind: "You'll meet a girl you love in the near future. Listen carefully: you have to safeguard her."

It was still autumn, and the air not yet chilly. The vague, blue sky stretched far and wide into the horizon. The contours of the clouds were indistinct, probably because of the rain yesterday. The heavy air felt damp, clinging to some watery smell. It was an autumn encouraging the desire to eat Pacific Sauries. Tada, still vigorous and living back then, was gone now.

4

The moon, flashing and sneaking up on us intermittently, moved in an exactly prearranged fashion. Before I had come to my own senses, I had already softened the push on the throttle. The scooter decelerated slowly, the sharp, intense engine sound being devoured by the surrounding silence and blackness, returning to utter silence.

Taking off the safety helmet, I let out a breath I had been holding onto for a long time.

"What's it?" Rika asked me.

"We're there," I replied.

"What?"

"We're there—the mountain peak."

It was a space with a diameter of around twenty metres. Blue and white pebbles tightly covered the ground, and there even were a few cars parked around. s When the engine stopped, the world immediately sunk into silence. Since it was the winter, we couldn't even hear bugs buzzing. On the peak without a single roadside lamp, we entered complete darkness; only the silver, white moonlight shown on the world.

"Is this the peak?" Rika's voice hinted desperation.

"Is the peak like this?"

The place shown by the moonlight was an empty parking lot, probably different from what appeared in Rika's memory.

Getting off the scooter, I said, "Five years ago, after reparation work, this had become the peak. Nevertheless, there's still a small road to go from here to there."

"Is that place really the peak?"

"Yeah."

"Is it far from here?"

"No. Let's go."

Hanging the safety helmet on the rear mirror, I stretched out my hand, and Rika held onto it. Holding hands, we began to walk. She was staggering, the knee part of her pajamas dyed in crimson; the blood seemed still flowing out. Rika's face would often twist in pain, but we didn't stop. Without any hesitation, we entered a path resembling a monster's intestine. The winter in this city wasn't that cold, as the warm current flew from the south. Yet today was exceptionally chilly. The breaths we heaved froze right in front of us, leaving a streak of whiteness bathed in rays, which, after painting a mark upon our eyes and our hearts, faded gradually.

We continued forward, our hands clasped together. Our footsteps, one by one, marked our advance. We didn't take too much time, around ten minutes. Should Rika's feet unwounded, we would need less than five minutes presumably. Once we brushed away the leaves of the fir trees, which still maintained their bright, vivd green colour despite of the winter, a fascinating site met our eyes. The new open site before us were much smaller than that we were before, about just half of that. This place was untouched, though, and the weeds were everywhere, the branches and bushed growing in all directions upon their own wills.

I stopped walking.

"This is the real peak."

Rika continued to look around.

To the right...and to the left.

To the right again and to the left again.

Finally, her stare landed on something right before her: a black object lying there. Staggering, she approached the object. Remaining silent, I followed.

That object was the fort. Rika rested her hand on the archaic concrete mash.

"I've seen this."

"Is this the place you and your father came? Is this it?"

"Yes. My father also lifted me up here at that time."

While I was still wondering whether the darkness of the night had subsided all in a moment, the whole word was embraced in a dazzling glow. The closely packed leaves became more vivid in the light. The weeds grew tall and packed. The flashing sunlight sprayed endless rays on our heads—it was summer back then.

In front of the black fort, the father and the daughter stood shoulder to shoulder, both of them drenched in sweat. The father even had a towel around his neck. The daughter was wearing a refreshing aqua-blue dress. The daughter, the young Rika, stretched her short arms eagerly to hold her father, and her father stretcher his hands under Rika's shoulders, lifting her petite body to the blue sky. Rika happily smiled; the smile was glistening with glee. Rika's small legs reached the concrete-made large fort. It was really a large one. The strong summer light shot straight at the archaic fort and Rika, drawing a clear contour of them, their shadows, on the ground. When the wind blew, Rika's fine hair would sway along. Her father would stare at her, squinting his eyes as if the wind was hitting his eyes. Rika kept her happy smile.

This fantasy vanished in an instant. When I came back to my senses, the chilly winter air again surrounded me. I, instead of Rika's father, was along with her.

It was I.

"Rika," I made up my mind and said, "do you want to go up and have a look?"

"Ah...but..."

"It's fine. Don't give me this look. I'm still a young man."

"Ah!"

Without letting her to reply, I had already held Rika. She was heavier than I had imagined. If I told this to her, she would definitely be infuriated. Hinging on the determination as a man, I lifted Rika up onto the fort stand.

"Rika. Hold that side with your hand."

"Hm. Okay."

Sigh. In the end, Rika had to go up with her own willpower. Following her, I grabbed onto the edge of the concrete mash. Stepping on a crack on the wall, I endeavoured to go up.

Once on the stand, the entire village laid below our eyes.

"It's beautiful."

"Yeah."

It was a tiny, really tiny village—a world completely secluded. I knew this place.

For some time, both of us kept silent, staring at the village in front of us. This way of observation showed the beauty of this place, but perhaps since it was bathed in the moonlight, it was reeking with a vague, dreamy ambiance. The fire-alarm tower and

the wondrous old station were left here. The large building in the front was the cultural exhibition. I could also see some contours of the shopping street completely left desolate today. The side at the station bounced off silver rays from the moonlight. Situated at the heart of the village was a great, vast darkness—the forest of the Ise shrine.

"Eh. Yuuichi," said Rika, at last.

"What? What's it?"

"Thanks."

"W-What do you mean..."

I was a bit flustered to hear her gratitude. It was the first time I heard something like "thank" coming out from Rika's mouth. I thought she was pulling a prank again, and I braced myself for it, yet what awaited me was Rika's genuine, simple smile.

"I have prepared myself mentally."

"Ah?"

"The preparation for death."

She still had that genuine smile.

"Now I can die in satisfaction."

At that instant, I felt I fell into the depths of darkness. Until now did I realise everything was on the wrong pages. Rika standing on

the rooftop appeared in my mind: “I really want to go there and have a look.” This was what Rika said. “If I do so, would I be mentally prepared as well?” At that time, I didn’t put much thought into what “mentally prepared” meant. I just listened and looked at the certain and positive part of that voice. Perhaps it was the mental preparation for the dangerous operation, or perhaps the mental preparation to keep living.

The truth was different, however. Rika came here to consolidate the mental preparation for death, the mental preparation to give up her life. I stared at the smiling Rika and stood up. I wanted to say something, but couldn’t say a word. I had worked so hard, troubling Tsukasa and getting rid of Akiko, but what I had done was just letting Rika to be mentally prepared for death.

The half moon glittered. So did the Sirius.

“Did my father come here harbouring the same feeling? My father was here as well...”

When she stopped speaking halfway, something rolled down from her eyes. This something, holding the moon, thus shining, slid down from Rika’s soft cheeks. These glowing pearls spilled endlessly. Cringing sounds sneaked out of Rika’s mouth. There had to be some meaning within Rika’s tears: her father’s death, the memories of her going up this mountain, her heart, the operation...

Now, perhaps Rika were impotent to withstand all of these. I laid my hand on Rika’s head. Words were useless. I could only gently stroke her swaying, beautiful hair. Again and again I stroked. Rika leaned near me. I had stopped thinking. My body

acted naturally. Tightly I embraced Rika's body. Rika, when held within my arms, felt much more petite than I had imagined. This petite body was sorrowful.

The half moon glittered. So did the Sirius. The brightness shone upon us.

When the wind blew, Rika's hair would sway along. Her strands of hair reflected the silver moonlight, shimmering. I could barely smell the aroma of shampoo.

For a long time, Rika just cried incessantly.

"The Ise shrine is huge."

"Yes, but there's another one to be counted as part of the Ise shrine."

"Eh? Why's that?"

The one in front of the station is the outer shrine. The other one is...look, it's there. Isn't there a zone especially dim? So as to speak, that one is the real Ise shrine. It's called the inner shrine."

We sat on the fort stand, casting our gaze on the village, chatting stuff about the village. Though what we chatted were trivial matters, we were delighted.

"Why are there two same shrines?"

"I don't know too. That's what it is."

"Won't it become confusing?"

"Maybe. But anyhow, both of them are called the Ise shrine."

"How odd."

Having cried for a while, Rika became quite lively. Nevertheless , signs of sorrow that hadn't been wiped were still stained on her cheeks. Every time I noticed them, I would remember the feeling of having Rika in my arms and her petite body.

"Hey. Yuuichi."

"Yeah?"

"Why did you take me here?" Rika's eyes were still damp. "To sneak out of the hospital and anger that nurse...won't you find much trouble for yourself?"

She was right. I would meet a dismal end, bound to be killed by Akiko upon returning to the hospital. When this came in mind, a chill would creep over my body. In spite of this, I told Rika optimistically, "My father told me that I had to safeguard girls."

The truth was different, however.

"You'll meet a girl you love in the near future. Listen carefull: you have to safeguard her."

This was what he really said. What the heck? I really staunchly followed my father's advice. My cheeks felt a bit hot.

"Oh. Your father really speaks reasonable advice."

For our surroundings were dark, Rika seemed not to have caught me lying.

My face should have been red and puffed by now.

"Not quite. My father's very irresponsible. He drinks and gambles. He had truly been a sucker."

Rika was a smart and bright girl, and she noticed my subtle way of expressing myself.

"Had been?"

I tried to make it clear and simple: "He was dead long ago. He destroyed his body with alcohol."

Sometime back then, when I went out to play in the midnight and came back, Tsukasa once said to me, ""I think it's a wonder why you, even knowing that Rika is so unruly, are willing to keep her company."

At that time, I intentionally interrupted Tsukasa's words, for I knew very clear what that bloke wanted to say.

Rika's father and my father had passed away. This kind of ambience and this kind of similar experiences hold us together, for our 'fathers' were replaced by 'the deceased, unable to be at our sides. This fact was residing in both of our hearts.

At that time, I didn't want to acknowledge this...

Because of my stupid father, I would be attractive to Rika.

Because of my stupid father, Rika would hold a special feeling towards me.

By no means did I want to acknowledge this.

Since a small age, I hated my father, for whatever my father did would make my mother cry. Back then, I should have a special loving relation with my mother. Anyhow, to the young me, my father was no different from an enemy.

Then, when I had the power to resist, my enemy plainly left. He was really a guy who left after winning.

My father's voice still rang from the depths of my heart: "You'll meet a girl you love in the near future. Listen carefull: you have to safeguard her."

What a truly dumb father, dying carelessly. What privilege had he earned to deploy me?

"So that's why you brought me here."

The smile faded away from Rika's face.

In some strange way, I felt her expression hinted regret.

"You brought me here because you haven't a father as well, Yuuichi."

I thought I heard a screeching sound, a sound exactly the same when Tsukasa approached me with kittens in his arms. Probably it was the sound made from wheels turning in the wrong direction.

She had mistaken. Rika seemed to have mistaken for something. Although I wasn't sure or it was or probably I wouldn't want to

make sure of it, there was, indeed, something mistaken. Now, something slipped from my hands.

I put my all to remedy this. I held her hands firmly.

"No. No! This has nothing to do with that! It doesn't mind what business I had with my father...It's that...I..."

I had to tell her: you have mistaken. At the beginning, both of us were interested, for we hadn't our fathers, thus having the same ambience. But now things were different. This was not the only reason I would do this. I would never, for this reason, dare to drive Akiko nuts and run all the way here. There was something much more important residing in some sector of my heart that...

"I'm...I..."

"Yuuichi?"

"I..."

Weird. I felt dizzy, my head reeling. A strange and heavy weariness grew in my body. The power that had driven me onwards till now seemed to have disappeared suddenly. I felt I was about to kneel down, my vision sliding subsequently. Although my knees abruptly hit on the fort stand, I felt no pain. Rika called my name, and her voice left me gradually.

This was as far as my memory could manage to record. My consciousness was cut off then with a banging sound.

Epilogue: Words Forgotten

エピローグ

覚えていない言葉

The one who came to our rescue was Akiko. When Akiko got our destination from Tsukasa and flew to us, Rika was wondering whether to drag me down the mountain. I was immovable like a dead person, and Rika was all bloody. The situation could be said as a complete mess. Even Akiko was floored upon seeing us.

To remain Tsukasa's reputation, I must add a note here. Under Akiko's devilish questioning, Tsukasa persisted in not telling our destination for more than two hours. But later when we hadn't return after some time, he spilled the beans out of worry and care. He wasn't a guy to be underestimated.

In the end, the freedom Rika and I acquired lasted for a short two hour, although the price of that two hours were a bit too high. I sickness, already worsened before, messed up my liver because of this unruly chaos. I heard my condition had worsened to the state when I first came here, so I would need at least a month to get out. This was a declaration of my stay in the hospital over the year.

"You really are something, being able to move around in such bad condition," the main doctor in charge said in surprise. He even laughed due to this shock.

Behind him, Akiko was enraged, her nerves racked up.

Anyway, I would have to stay on the bed immovable for around a week, my body severely worn out, deprived of even the power to get up. My body temperature lingered around thirty-nine degrees Celsius, receiving various injections throughout the day.

The world seemed to twist because of the heat of my body. In this slightly twisted world, it was difficult to differentiate dreams from the reality, and I remembered a lot of things. Then, my thoughts were burned to ashes by the high heat of thirty-nine degrees. Perhaps, I believe, I had talked with my father in one of my dreams. In a slight unhappy tone, my father ordered the young me to buy photographic plates for him. “Listen carefully: buy the TriX four hundred.” Nodding, I held the five hundred yen dollar hardly and dashed out of home like a vigorous little monkey. I smiled under the dazzling sunlight, running and smiling in joy. The scene was wondrous. I should be in great hate of my father at that time.

Sigh. A dream is only a dream, not a representation of reality.

I had also talked with Rika in my dreams. Rika and I rode on a scooter like what we did that night. Rika’s hands clasped over my waist, holding me tightly. We sped forward endlessly and continuously.

“Don’t fell off!” Rika said with a bit of anger.

I replied in a carefree tone, “I said I know.”

Then, to scare Rika, I would deliberately accelerate suddenly, and Rika would cry out in a rarely adorable voice, then hitting my safety helmet.

“You idiot!”

Though being hit, I smiled in joy. Though a dream, I realised at that time I was in great favour of Rika's angry voice. I forgot what happened after that. Where had we gone?

When I was finally able to move around, I immediately sneaked out of the ward without being noticed by Akiko. My body felt heavy and ill; even walking was strenuous.

Although there were a lot of old people in the hospital, they look much livelier than me, walking like tortoises yet passing beside me in great speed. A more frustrating thing was that after three old farts 'overtook' me, they turned around to give me a wicked grin. It looked as if Tada wasn't the only sinister old guy around. Albeit I could almost tear up from my worn out and useless appearance, I knew I deserved for what I had done. I couldn't blame anyone.

"Fu..."

Spending time minutes, I managed, in any case, to reach Rika's ward. I knocked on the door. There was no reply.

Rats. Perhaps she went to have a check-up. If that was the case, then I had wasted all this effort. Man, so much for all the painstaking walk.

When this thought was still in my mind, the door was opened with a strong force.

"You big idiot!"

Upon seeing my face, Rika scowled furiously.

"I have a question."

I was lying...on Rika's bed. Of course, Rika wasn't lying beside me, but on the fold chair. She glared at me with eyes as sharp and cruel as Akiko.

"Why the treatment?"

"You're a patient."

"Aren't you the patient? Your condition is obviously worse than mine."

I was eyed cruelly.

"I can't stand you," said Rika with an insatiable tone.

"Yuuichi, you shouldn't even get off the bed. You're a big idiot."

"I told you it's fine for a short walk."

"No."

"But..."

"No."

"Umm..."

"No."

Whatever I said was rejected, so I could only keep silent.

In the daytime, the hospital was noisy, cramped with different sounds. "Lady, that's very dangerous," someone cried. Quick walking sounds came from a nurse. Nurses walk with fast-paced steps from day to night. Sounds of a TV anchor came from the adjacent ward: "So our year is coming to a close. Our brewer is now preparing for the first worship in the Ise shrine. According to the traditions, we are very busy preparing for sweet wine every year..."

The sweet wine in the Ise shrine is mixed with large amounts of ginger. I had no idea what those people were up to: excess gingers in wine would only pain your throat. Every year, I would make up my mind to refrain from drinking again, yet I would forget in the successive year and continue gulping those wines.

"Hey," I said, after settling my guts, "I didn't take you to the Turret Mountain because of my father."

Right. I could tell this to her with determination and courage. During the week I laid in bed with fever, I kept thinking about how to tell this to her, these words I wanted to tell even when I lost

my consciousness. In any case, I had to tell her as soon as possible. But how will Rika...ah?

She showed such an expression hidden in her words: “Yuuichi. Did you come here to tell me this? You did all this for me?”

What. This was what I got in return.

“So...you forgot everything, Yuiichi?”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“I was saying...when you passed out in the Turret Mountain.”

Rika was suddenly experiencing difficulty in speaking. This was the first time I had seen Rika in this state. Also, her cheeks had , in some time, turned gradually red.

“Hm. After you fell down, didn’t you...say...umm..that... something?”

“Did I say something then?”

“Yes.” Rika’s face was completely red. “You said it.”

What did I say? I didn’t dare to ask. My face was heating up as well. My palms became damp from sweat. My entire stomach seemed to went up to somewhere near my throat.

What did I say after all?

The answer remained a mystery, for, after three minutes, Akiko swooped into the ward, threw me on a wheelchair, and took me back to my ward. On the way, Akiko kept scowling furiously, " How many times do I need to tell you! Your body is inapt for any kind of physical activity. Why don't you understand? Your mind must be completely empty! I'm sure. Like dry, shrunken green peppers, your mind will make popping sounds once knocked on."

With that said, she really knocked on my head. It didn't make popping sounds, though, rather, hard, heavy sounds. It's still hell of a pain, however. Wasn't it common to see nurses knock on the patient's head?

"What did I say when I passed out?"

Asked, Akiko immediately laughed out, making a short cutting sound.

"W-Why are you laughing?"

"Eh? Have you forgotten?"

"I really did say something, didn't I?"

Being asked a few times, Akiko remained unwilling to answer me. She just kept grinning and smiling, saying repeatedly, “Ayah. It’s great,” or “Being young is certainly different,” or “I’m so jealous.”

What did I say after all?

What she referred to as “being young” hinted what I had said was of pivotal importance. When I recuperated by lying on my bed , my body recovered in extraordinary speed. Two weeks after the incident at the Turret Mountain, my fever went away completely. At the same time, Akiko stopped imprisoning me, though the curfew continued. This meant I couldn’t sneak out of the hospital; the most I could do was to stroll around in the hospital. In my stroll, I would often pay a visit to Rika’s ward. Rika acted as usual, being way too unruly, and demanding me to do this or that. On the other hand, I would just heed to her every beck and call. I didn ’t know why, but I enjoyed this, perhaps I was intrinsically a loyal servant. Rika emotions would get pretty bad when her condition worsened. In those times, simply looking at her pale face and her posture of lying deep on the bed would make my heart ache and grieve. Anyone could tell Rika’s life was as fragile as a candle in the wind. Rika was clearer than anyone else. On one day, Rika suddenly said something like this: death was her neighbour. Once

closing her eyes, she could fell that person standing right next to her. It wouldn't scare her or call her, but just quietly stand there.

"It would wait obediently for a long time, yet it wouldn't just vanish or go away. I'm very clear it would stay beside me. Perhaps I could even touch it by stretching my hand. Then, it would, someday, take me to somewhere else."

This feeling was beyond my apprehension, for even if my condition worsened, it wouldn't be fatal. So I could only remain silent and keep her company, hoping this could deter the death behind her to a bit farther distance.

I prayed...anytime and anywhere. (Please don't take Rika away.) I would repeat myself again and again. My wish before was to leave this village and move into the metropolitan, getting into the crowd and knowing all sorts of things. Although I might tear up or think myself a useless piece of trash, life in the city had to be hundreds of thousands of times better than the steady life in this suburban place.

Now I still had that wish, but a stronger, more real, warmer dream had gradually occupied me. For this dream, I was willing to lose everything else.

Hence, I kept praying. (Please don't take Rika away.)

If the god of death would really appear in front of me, I would denounce him from being a god, until he couldn't strangle back up . The unpalatable truth was that I couldn't.

In one night, before the lights were turned off, I went to Rika's ward as usual.

"Eh. Yuuichi," Rika said right upon seeing me," you're stressed as well."

Her heartfelt and sorrowful tone raised my caution. What should I do this time? Would she be asking me to buy her bread or beverages to quench her thirst? Even when I ask her which juice she wanted, she would never answer, or just let me choose. Then, when I had bought it, she would tell me this wasn't what she wanted and demanded me to buy something else.

Sigh. Why did I choose this path covered with thorns?

"What's it this time?"

Prepared mentally, I stood up, but something different came out from Rika's mouth in the next instant: "You don't have to go through all the trouble to take care of me."

"W-What's the matter? Why are you saying that?"

"Isn't that so? I don't know how long I'll live. Perhaps I'll be gone on the next day! That's...That's really going to happen. I have

to make myself clear: there wouldn't be anything good happening if you stick around me; you'll only bear dismal consequences."

Her words weren't overstated but the truth. The flashing gem in my hands would fall off at any moment. However hard I grasped it in my hands, or however I wanted to safeguard it in the depths of my heart, perhaps, when I returned to my senses, I would only find the gem broken to pieces beside my feet.

Rika was smiling at that time. She smiled after preparing herself mentally. Looking at her smile, I couldn't say words such as "this wouldn't happen." Rika understood her fate. She had given up everything. On that day, that day we went to the Turret Mountain, she had made up her mind to prepare herself mentally for death.

I nodded my head to ascertain my thoughts.

"It's fine this way..." my voice sounded hoarse.

Actually I had to employ different kinds of words to convey my feelings to Rika. Yet, as a piece of trash, I couldn't make up any word of that sort. Lifting my head, I found Rika eyeing me closely. Her smile had long gone from her face. What the expression she held represented was a bit difficult to understand. Then, I lowered my head again.

Akiko's footstep sounds came from somewhere afar. Although it was the same stepping sound nurses had specially, the pace of Akiko's footsteps was always a bit disarrayed. She might be infuriated again; perhaps she threw a large tantrum at someone just now. Akiko's footstep sounds gradually left until inaudible. At

the same time, Rika commenced, “I might have to take the operation.”

I was shocked by this unexpected decision.

“Eh? Is that fine? Isn’t the operation difficult?”

She nodded.

“But if I don’t take the operation, my life would only become shorter.”

“...”

“They say if I take the operation, I could still cling to some slight hope.”

Both of us remained silent for a while.

"I have prepared myself mentally," Rika said and added later, " ..all thanks to Yuuichi."

The mental preparation Rika talked about just now was different from that she talked about when she was at the Turret Mountain. For a while, I hadn't noticed this. But this was what she said at that time: she had prepared herself mentally for death. Nevertheless, the mental preparation she talked about was the preparation to continue her life. And for this she would decide to take this dangerous operation. Speaking of which, the meaning of this mental preparation had changed at some time point. I didn't know what or when it had changed. Although I wanted to know, I, perhaps of embarrassment, decided to remain ignorant.

Rika was flushed. To Rika, who don't easily get this embarrassed, this expression was perhaps her limit.

"Mmm. Yeah."

Stuttering and flushing, I had reached my limit as well. To veil both of our embarrassment, we looked through the windows together. We could see the shrine's forest in a faraway place as well as the Turret Mountain. The half moon glittered with brightness the same way it did that night. So did the Sirius. That brightness showered on us faintly.

There was one last thing. Tada's collection was all stacked under my bed. Sometimes my fair weather friends would come and bring away with them one or two. So these stuff were now renamed as Ezaki's collection. Of course, this was completely kept away from Rika. Do I even have to spell it out?

Afterword

Having moved to a suburban place, we found a lot of wild cats nearby. Sometime after, they gradually began coming to our place. Nevertheless, we had already two cats in the house; thus naturally fired were a scaring war between these two kinds of cats. The wild cats would screech with hoarse sounds in a condescending tone, and the first cat in our house would surprisingly make an especially adorable purring sound in response.

Didn't you feel any threat, our first cat?

The second cat, on the other hand, had no intention to make a threat, putting all his concentration on staring blankly at the wild cats (which were still supposedly threatening them)...

My sweet cats sound fine, don't they?

So my cat talk ends here.

This first volume of Hanbun no Tsuki ga Noboru Sora was written according to the short novel published in the twenty-second release of the dengeki magazine! The story I expected to end in one single script was surprisingly awarded the first place (I'm touched!). Thus came the publishing plan of this light novel, and, thus, this book could be in your hands. Nevertheless, there were quite some hurdles during the process this story was published in the dengeki hp.

"Please write a short one...about fifty pages when printed in a light novel"

This was what I was asked to do.

“I understand...around fifty pages.”

Answering flatly was simple, but I ended up writing endlessly. The plot I had preemptively thought of sprang to my mind continuously. When I had come to my senses, I had easily broken the fifty-page limit and had no traces of ending.

When I had completed it after much effort, I counted the page numbers...to find things out of hand, as I had written double the page number...in fact...it was triple...what could I do...

Holding my head in agony for a while, I could only give in and phone the editing department.

“Um...I carelessly wrote a long story.”

“I expected this to happen, as you’ve been writing this for some time by now. How many pages are there approximately?”

“Ac-Actually it isn’t much. I think around a bit till two-hundred .”

“... (shocked)”

The length of the published script was prescribed. Although there is a bit of changing offered, it wasn’t enough for my outrageous work. (Hashimoto is such a jerk. Wuaghh) Helpless, I could only cut my work in tears. But even after cutting, it was still too long to be published on that release of the magazine, not even

in the next magazine. I had to wait for two releases until it could be published successfully.

This was when I began thinking whether this could be published as a light novel. After all, removing so many stuff, even parts where I wanted to write down no matter what, I hoped I could retain the longer version. (Albeit, I like the short version to be published on the dengeki hp. I think the short version is a wonderful piece of work too.)

I'm really grateful of the readers who voted for "Hanbun" in the survey in the twenty-second release of dengeki hp. You have my gratitude. Thanks to you, this book could be sold in bookstores now.

As for the content, I want to slightly complement some settings to the story. This story uses my old town Mie Ise. But since I had left Ise for a long time, the description in the book might be different subtly from the Ise nowadays.

Also, although Yuiichi and Rika started off by living in a hospital, that hospital had some distance from Ise. Perhaps the Ise in the book wasn't the actual Ise but the Ise in my memories.

This tory would keep going on in short terms. I believe there would be other scenes in Ise, such as the "O abdomen cafeteria". The "O abdomen cafeteria" is situated behind the station, much like the eating-place students registered. The amount of rice served was a great lot. That restaurant was one that when touching the word 'big-sized', it would mean the serving is definitely unable to finish. Looking at those who work themselves out by trying to

finish it, and their rice that hadn't a bit indication of decreasing, someone might suspect, in tears, "there must be some conspiracy." But for some reason, the rice with eggs covered always had a thick taste of peppers. Last time, when I ran there to eat after a long time , the amount was still too great, the pepper taste too thick. Hell, why would anyone dump so many peppers there...

Also, some old lady in the shopping street was extraordinary. She would teach us Okonomiyaki, and in a very exaggerated fashion.

"Remember that you have to spread the flour blob to this size. Look carefully."

The old lady would then stick her hands onto the teppan, which was already lit with fire. Her hands would make sizzling sounds—her hand was burning...burning. Yet the old lady didn't seem to care a bit.

"Do you understand? The size has to be around this."

I-I understand. Now please take off you hand (Cold sweat trickling). Did that old lady understand?

Finally, here is my word of gratitude. Thanks to Yamamoto, an illustrator I first worked with. I still have much to learn from you. Thanks to the person who designed the moon in the story published in dengeki hp. Then, thanks to Tokuda, the editor, who take all-round care of me. I'm sorry for my unruliness. I'm serious: you have my heartfelt gratitude. And to the readers now holding this book...I believe some of you are reading Hashimoto's book for

the first time; some of you had read before. I'm really grateful. If possible, I hope to listen to our opinion and do my best to reply.

Some scenes, though insignificant and trivial, are memorable when left. Some thought as gone, the various memories and traces of relevant feeling would revive from the depths of our heart when we're unaware, leaving a deep, warm sensation. Anyone would have such feelings. I have, and you must have as well. What I want to continue writing in my story is this. Since the first line of the new opening of the next volume is already set, the next volume would have an early release (probably).

2003 Summer
Tsumugu Hashimoto

References

1. ↑ Raising one's little finger in Japan meant 'women', ' girlfriend', or 'wife'.
2. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Mackaroo
3. ↑ The tripartite talk here refers to the talk between the Japanese teacher, the student, and his or her parents. The talk pinpoints the career future, further learning, and learning progress of the student.
4. ↑ In Japan, scooters are prohibited to carry passengers.
5. ↑ AD 1942-1943